

Tuesday Reflection 26 October 2021

“Signs of the times”

‘The market’ is perhaps one of the most powerful symbols of modern Western capitalist culture (WCC). It encourages consumption and competition, and leads us to judge a person’s value by what they have rather than by what they are. It is a culture which trades in images; consumer goods are judged by their branding rather than by any inherent qualities they have - we need shoes, but they have to be trainers, which have to be Nike or Adidas or whatever. It encourages a mindset that ‘knows the price of everything but the value of nothing’ (Oscar Wilde).

As such, WCC runs contrary to many Christian values. We only need to remind ourselves what Our Lord said “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19) and to remember His words in John 2:16 “Stop turning my father’s house into a market”.

This last quote brings us to the heart of the matter. Not only are we as Christians prey to the seductiveness of the market metaphor in our daily lives, but we allow it to infect our faith lives as well.

We ‘shop around’ for a church that suits us, the weekly church service sits alongside the weekly shop. We go to church for what it ‘gives us’, for what we ‘get out of it’. In a word, we become ‘consumers’ of religion. And churches are complicit in this; they adopt marketing techniques and practices.

As Pope Francis put it recently: “the Christian faith in Europe is being diluted by consumerism”; Christians are in danger of becoming passive consumers rather than active disciples. 80% of the community allow the remaining 20% to do 80% of the ministry - an attitude that is particularly encouraged in the Catholic Church by the predominant clerical culture.

But it doesn’t have to be like this. Pope Francis has convoked the Church of God in Synod. What this means is that we now have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the whole Church to learn how to ‘live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission’. To adapt something that the late President Kennedy said: “Ask not what the Church can do for you. Ask what you can do for the Church.”

Michael Townson