



Jesus and Fundamental Values

In the first Chavasse lecture on May 2 at Wycliffe Hall, named after Bishop Christopher Chavasse of Rochester and revived after 15 years, the current Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir Ali explored the relationship between the values needed in society today and Jesus of Nazareth.

Bishop Michael commented on the trend in commercial, educational and political organizations to publish a list of values since this recognised that people look for more than markets, coercion or an elected dictatorship in their common life.

He noted some of the core values that become immediately apparent: the desire to affirm human dignity; liberty – all human beings are created free, and it is the duty of such governments to uphold freedom; the notion of equality and the requirement of safety. Fourthly, people need to be protected from harm. In contemporary western society this protection from harm should include protection from harm to vital social institutions such as marriage, family and the church.

Are these values are freestanding? Did they suddenly arise from the 18th century enlightenment? Why should they be self-evident? They must be shown to arise out of what people believe about themselves, not be imposed by an elite. Values have to be about social institutions.

Properly understood morality is too important to be left to politicians. Values should be held by all. We should know why and how they have arisen. The fact is that many legislators in the UK invoke a transcendent principle, which is expressed in the Christian view that men and women are made in the image of God. This means for example that except in self-defence, human life cannot be taken. At the beginning of life, since science cannot settle when personhood begins in the embryo, the transcendent precautionary principle means that the embryo must be treated as if it has inalienable dignity. Equality before the law also goes back to these Christian origins. The sanctity of human life, the dignity of the embryo, and equality before the law cannot be plucked from thin air. If treated discretely and separately they will wither. These basic values are deeply embedded in a moral and spiritual vision and receive vigour from person, suffering and resurrection of Jesus.

The slave trade campaign was based on the gospel value of equality. The campaigners wanted the slaves to be free so that they could be what God wanted them to be, but that was not to be like the slavers.

Jesus resurrection affirms and vindicates the whole of creation and anticipates the end for which we were created. Jesus' resurrection gives us the means of valuing the whole of creation which is being redeemed by the creator. Questions of personal and universal value cannot be removed by science.

In the Christian vision, dignity and equality are taken to a new level. They are restored in the resurrection and exalted in the ascension. Receiving the gospel has given millions of people a sense of dignity and destiny, and of being able to make a difference in the course of history. Instead of seeing themselves as nobodies, people can see themselves as somebodies.

The Bishop also showed how a society rooted in a Christian moral and spiritual vision can be welcoming of others without compromising its integrity. There is no 'neutral' standpoint and what claims to be such can marginalise people of all faiths.

The next two lectures on May 24 and June 14 at Wycliffe Hall are about how the person and work of Jesus relate to issues we are facing today.

The lectures are to be published by Paternoster Press as *The Unique and Universal Christ* in 2008.