

From Father Bede to a Friend

edited by Hazel Eyles

Prinknash Abbey Good Friday 1940

Dear Martyn,

Thank you very much for your letter. I hope you won't mind as prompt a reply to it, as yours was to mine, but there is always a good deal of leisure on Good Friday after the ceremonies of the day, and we have just touched on a subject that interests me so much that I would like to continue it.

I had forgotten our argument about the analogy of the Roman Empire and the present times. To me now the analogy is striking. I can almost envisage a return to the actual boundaries of the Roman Empire. If one tries to conceive of a new order arising in Europe after the war, is it not possible that it might consist of England, France, Italy and Spain and the Catholic provinces of Germany, the Rhineland, Bavaria and Austria, standing against Russia and pagan Germany?

This would be almost exactly a reconstitution of the Roman Empire with pagan Russia and Germany playing the part of Barbarians.

For me the problem is, how can the Christian tradition in England, France, Italy and Spain, Germany, and perhaps even in Russia in time, be so strengthened as to form a united front against paganism and barbarianism?

This is where I come back to the Roman Empire. It seems to me that there were three forces that combined in the creation of our Christian civilisation, the religion of Israel, the culture of Greece and the civilisation of Rome. Out of these was formed the Christian Roman Empire of the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries. When the barbarian invasions came at the beginning of the 5th century, the Roman Empire collapsed, and the only power which remained to uphold this civilisation was the Church. During the Dark Ages it was the Church which preserved the tradition of culture and civilisation.

In the 8th century Italy, England, Germany and France were united in a common faith, a common culture, of which the Christian

Empire of Charlemagne was the political expression. It is here, it seems to me, not in the Middle Ages, still less in the Renaissance, that the real root, or rather trunk, of our common civilization is to be found. In this there were present all the elements of literature and art, science and philosophy, law and theology, which make up our heritage. The culture of the Middle Ages from the 10th - 15th century was simply the flowering, or the branching if you like, of this civilisation, and the Renaissance and the modern movement in science and life, are all rooted in this common tradition.

“We hold the principles of true religion, of true humanism, of a true order of society, & nothing matters except that we should preserve those principles & hand them on to posterity.”

Nevertheless, it is true, that at the Renaissance our culture lost its centre in Christianity. Science and philosophy, poetry and history, political and economic thought all developed independently, instead of growing harmoniously from one centre as in the Middle Ages. It has caused a one-sided development and consequently ugliness and disorder in everything: religion and art, science and politics and human life itself have all suffered in consequence, and in the return to barbarism in Russia and Germany, and to crass materialism in England, France and America, we are witnessing the final dissolution of Christian civilisation.

I suppose that you and I agree more or less on this; but I wonder whether we differ as much as you think over the remedy. Humanism is a very fine thing,

but it cannot stand alone. I think you will find that all great ages of humanism have been rooted in religion. The humanism of Athens in the 5th century and of Pluvius in the 15th are obvious examples, and is it not equally true of the cultures of China and India, Egypt and Assyria and America? Is it not the reason of our modern weakness that man has tried to stand alone and refused to accept his place in the order of the universe? The cult of blood and race, or of class consciousness, is only a violent reaction to the frightful isolation of man in the universe, when he is without religion. It seems to me therefore that humanism must go back to its roots in the past, and it is only in a new Christian culture and civilisation, rooted in the past, but developing with all the added power and knowledge of modern science and history and political thought that we can hope to preserve our human heritage.

I am convinced that Christianity has nothing now to fear from science or modern thought: our theology and philosophy, our history and social thought are all now firmly established by men who have mastered all that the mind has to say. I believe that the best minds in Europe today are already Christian: doubtless the lesser minds and the great mass of men will continue to be pagan or agnostic for a long time; but ultimately the power of truth makes itself felt.

We hold the principles of true religion, of true humanism, of a true order of society, and nothing matters except that we should preserve those principles and hand them on to posterity. That is why I regard with so much enthusiasm the building of our new abbey. It is for me a symbol of the rebirth of Christian faith, Christian culture and Christian society. To you, it can be no more than another outpost of Roman Catholicism in this country, which can hardly be expected to excite much enthusiasm.

Yours ever affectionately
D. Bede

Bede Griffiths

