



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Easter VII (16th May) 2021

The portion of the Gospel read this morning is pivotal to David Lloyd Dusenbury's book, **THE INNOCENCE OF PONTIUS PILATE**. In it, he reflects on its citation over the centuries to determine the culpability or otherwise of the Roman Governor in the Crucifixion of Christ.

Interwoven with and integral to the argument is the interpretation of Jesus' words that His Kingdom is not of this world. Dusenbury traces the invocation of the text by various authors to criticise the Church's acquisition and holding of earthly power.

There is a lengthy strand condemning the institution of the Papal States - a tract of territories mainly in what is now central Italy governed by the Pope as its temporal lord, which were swept away by the Risorgimento culminating in 1870. However, the issue ran more widely, encompassing the temporal power of episcopacy and other ecclesiastical institutions linked to their land holdings or their holding of offices of state.

Today, for the most part, these more conspicuous instances of prelates and others holding temporal power have been swept away. Even where they endure the notion that they are major players in world politics would be faintly ridiculous if it were proposed. Even much of the political influence - rather than raw power - once enjoyed by the Church has waned over the past decades.

Caught up in the momentum of Dusenbury's book, we can walk away with a feeling that the Church's waning earthly power is a good thing. However, we need to pause before moving on.

Set alongside Jesus' dictum that His Kingdom is not of this world, is what we might term the *incarnational imperative* of Christianity - the requirement on us not to retreat into a little bubble of religiosity, but to work for the transformation of the society around us by living in and engaging with it. Yet the kingdom of this world can tantalise us with lures, not just for self-advantage, but also holding out the prospect of furthering the mission of the Church, when, in fact, once drawn in, it is the agenda of the world, which is further in the earthly institution of the Church.

How we hold together these two principles - the Kingdom not of this world on the one hand and the *incarnational imperative* on the other - is a constant challenge: being involved without been diverted from the Christian path or, as it is often phrased, being in the world, but not of it.

Does this mean that Christians should eschew worldly office? No, it does not, but there is perhaps a distinction to be drawn between individuals and the institution of the Church: a possible illustration of which we find in what for many might be a rather unexpected example.

Sir Roger Hollis, the erstwhile Director of MI5, was said frequently to be found at the early Mass in Saint Matthew's Westminster. If there are occupations, which particularly challenge the life of Christian discipleship, his, I would think, would be one of them. The gentle Eucharistic rhythm of the Church provided the spymaster with a context to step aside from the momentum of his role and reflect on how he has doing his job, measuring his choices and actions against the precepts of his faith.

The Church, as an institution, should look not to exercise worldly power, but aspire to an outcrop of that Kingdom, which is not of this world. In so doing, she provides, as it were, the soil into which individual Christians can sink the roots of their discipleship, even as, responding to the *incarnational imperative*, their daily lives are pursued in the environment created by the kingdoms of this world.