

**Jesus College Chapel, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2017**

**The Holy Spirit: the Lord and giver of life.**

**Galatians 5: 16-26**

In MT and HT I worked with a colleague from UTS, who was visiting Oxford on sabbatical. The focus of our work was the financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent erosion of trust in the financial sector. The evidence is that bonus incentives for those working in financial markets contributed to the crowding-out of regard for the interests of customers, leading to a lack of moral restraint in the behaviour of market participants in the lead-up to the crisis. It has been established, for example, that no less an institution than Goldman Sachs sold mortgage backed securities that the GS staff knew full well were highly likely to prove worthless to investors. Why did they do this? Because they had incentive contracts that linked their remuneration to the fees they earned on such transactions. Those outside the financial sector have every reason not to trust bankers.

There has been much discussion about what might be done to remedy this situation – how to ensure that market participants exercise moral restraint in their dealings. Generally agreed that it is not enough to restructure incentives so that market actors will be ‘trustworthy’ so long as it is in their interests to be so – looking for ‘strong trust’ – that is market participants who will exercise moral restraint in their dealings even if it is not in their financial interests. We want more than just clever bankers – we need ‘good’ bankers or ‘virtuous’ bankers.

In a similar vein, over the past couple of years I have been tangentially involved in a programme for graduate students in Oxford called the Oxford Character Project. The starting point for this programme was a realization that ‘moral education’ had ceased to be part of the Oxford ‘experience’. The Oxford M Phil in Economics is probably the hardest master’s course in economics anywhere in the world, and those who complete the course often go on to prestigious jobs with international agencies, central banks or global consultancies advising government and business worldwide. They are technically exceptional as economists. But my judgement, as someone who taught on the course, was that they were often deficient in what might be called moral acuity – they were clever but not wise, leaders but not moral leaders. Does this matter? One lesson from the financial crisis is that it most certainly does. The Character Project is seeking to address this lack with a programme based on Aristotelian virtue ethics, focussing on sense of vocation, commitment to service, gratitude and humility. It does this by taking participants through a series of readings, reflective activities, and small group interactions. The thinking is that exposure to the lives of great leaders and moral thinkers will enable the students to begin to develop their own moral resources and leadership.

A concern for moral formation – the idea that a person’s inner dispositions matter for how they live their lives – has always been a central theme in Christian teaching. The passage that was read from St Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia is a case in point. St Paul provided a list of inner dispositions, which he described as the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace; patience, kindness, goodness; faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The suggestion is that the first three – love, joy, peace – are fundamental dispositions arising from a relationship with God: those who experience God’s love will enjoy peace and joy in their lives. The second triad – patience, kindness, goodness – are essentially social virtues that should regulate our relationships with others. The third triad – faithfulness (or integrity), gentleness, and self-control are directed towards the self. A person with these dispositions is likely to be a good friend, a good worker, a good member of the college, a good citizen, and should circumstances require it, a good leader. He or she would be someone who could be trusted to live with integrity and to put the flourishing of others before self-interest. A helpful, if challenging, exercise is

to set aside some time to go through the list, and give yourself (an honest) mark for each virtue, on a scale of one to ten. Of course, that presumes that this is the kind of person you would like to be. It may not be!

But if you would, then the question is where these virtues and inner dispositions come from, and how they can be cultivated. Evident from the passage that St Paul did not believe that they are 'natural' for human beings. On the contrary, he suggested that human nature apart from God – which is what the term 'flesh' means in this passage – will lead to a very different lifestyle, as his listing of the 'acts of the flesh' makes clear. I do sometimes wonder about that list – the culture he described sounds rather rough – but perhaps that was what St Paul had observed on his travels in Greece and Asia Minor.

So how can Christian dispositions and virtues be developed? St Paul urged his readers to 'live by the Spirit', 'to be led by the Spirit', 'to keep in step with the Spirit'. The Spirit here is the one Jesus promised to his followers to be with them in their daily lives – he is the Spirit of Jesus. Christians differ in how they think this works out. At the one extreme, there are Christians who emphasise the supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit to fill the life of the Christian, taking over that life and thus reforming it in the image of Jesus. At the other extreme, there are Christians who interpret St Paul's teaching as no more than individuals striving to follow the example of Jesus, to reflect on his life and teaching, to practice living according to his precepts, and hence developing those virtues by force of habituation. That is the method, if not the content, of the Character Project. My own experience is somewhere in between the extremes. There is both a supernatural aspect of allowing the Holy Spirit to inhabit my life, and there is a practical aspect of bending my mind and my will to follow the example and teaching of Jesus.

Our grandchildren are quite fond of the phrase 'Get a life'. The question is what sort of life. That is a question not just for a week or a term: it is a question we need to answer for our whole life. Christians will usually respond in terms of becoming more like Jesus, and that involves nurturing the kind of dispositions and virtues that appear in St Paul's list. In the Creed we affirm 'I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life'. It is as we entrust our lives to the Spirit, allowing him to rule as Lord over our lives, that he will nurture in us the fruits of the Spirit. 'Love, joy, peace; patience, kindness, goodness; integrity, gentleness, self-control'. They constitute the basis for a life worth living.