

Isaiah 49: 1-7 & Ephesians 4:1-16

We meet here for the first service of 2019, a new year, with a new Treasurer, whom we wish well in what will be a busy but rewarding year of office. Last year, 2018, was a year of anniversaries, not least the centenary of the end of the First World War. But one commemoration that was rather over-looked in the run-up to Christmas was last month's 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We had no opportunity to remember it here during Advent, but surely an institution like this should not let it pass by.

The Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on 10th December 1948. It set out, for the first time, fundamental human rights which are to be universally protected. It says that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".

What might we say about Human Rights in this context of Christian worship? Let's start by diffusing two easy, but false, assumptions. The first is that we as a country are totally committed to basic human rights. We are the good guys. It's the others who need to pull up their socks.

This needs some examining. It's true that the UK played a leading role in the formation of the Universal Declaration and the European Convention, and not least those lawyers who had administered the Nuremberg Trials. But today the Foreign Office has identified thirty countries where human rights are a concern, and last year it approved arms export licences to eighteen of them. The Parliamentary Committee on Arms Exports has

called for much more monitoring and controls. It's been largely ignored. As I said in the Armistice Day sermon, the human rights of a child in the Yemen are easily eclipsed by our right to make as much profit as we can by selling arms to Saudi Arabia.

The second claim that we need to dismantle is that human rights are the product of the Enlightenment when it removed the oppressive controls which religion had justified. Now no-one can deny that, within Europe, the Christian religion was indeed used to undergird dehumanising systems which treated ordinary people as worthless pawns, while proclaiming that those in power were there by "divine right". But the opposition to this philosophy did not come primarily from secularisation, from rejecting the teaching and power of the Church. Our modern belief in human rights came much more from a rediscovery of what is at the core of the Christian tradition.

First, it was the Protestant reformers with their emphasis on personal faith, on individual responsibility, on the freedom to come to faith in their own right. The founding fathers of American democracy drew not on the (secular) French Revolution but on the belief that all men were created (Yes, created by God) as equal. The UN Declaration does not use the word "created" but it does say that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.... (and) endowed with reason and conscience".

And then, from another part of the Church, came the rediscovery within Catholic Social Teaching of what the Bible says about how we need to live together, not for personal gain over and against our neighbour, but

for mutual flourishing, working for the common good, building social justice.

These two things – individual freedom, and the common good - are the basis of modern human rights. But already we find a tension: a tension between the more Protestant emphasis on the individual and the more Catholic emphasis on the community. It's sometimes summarised as Rights versus Responsibilities, but it's more basic than that: it's whether we are essentially autonomous beings or part of something greater.

Now at this point we could digress into what was perhaps the most significant development of 2018: the increasingly observable move away from institutional belonging to Identity politics. We could even touch on Brexit, which you might possibly have noticed in the News! But my fundamental point is this: the greatest challenge to human rights today is the very individualism on which they are now based. The more we stress the right of the individual to define who they are and to determine what they want, the more we weaken any sense of who we are together and our responsibilities to each other, and inevitably the result is that those with more power feel able to ride rough-shod over those who have less.

This was the real result of the Enlightenment, on the surface, maybe, universal rights, but underneath something much more dangerous. At its worst it's what we call Utilitarianism – the belief that in an imperfect world, you can only do the best you can, and if some people fall out at the other end, well it's sad but not your fault. It would be nice if everyone could be treated equally, and we'll do everything we can to enable that, but there comes a point, often the point where our own rights might be challenged, where we need to draw the line.

It's here is that the Christian Faith comes into direct conflict with modern thought. For the Christian Gospel proclaims not just our individual liberty but our corporate responsibility. It rejects a utilitarian understanding of the world. It says that we are created beings – in the words we heard just now from Isaiah “Before I was born... God formed me in the womb”. So each person is of equal worth, and has an equal right to life and all the other benefits which are now named as human rights. And the Christian Gospel also says there is no escaping the fact that we belong together, and we are accountable (to God) for what we do. Together we make up that Body which we heard about in the Second Lesson. When Paul says that “we are members one of another” he doesn't mean that we should all sign up to something, but rather that together we make up one body, we are the limbs and organs, we belong together.

As Christians we rightly value both of these things. On the one hand Faith is a personal journey, where God calls us and treats us as individuals, he loves us equally, and he waits for us to respond. And on the other, we belong together, as members of the Church, as members of the human race – called, to quote Ephesians again, “to promote the body's growth in building itself up in love”.

To sum up, we should celebrate that for the past seventy years there has been this universal acceptance of basic human rights, because they reflect, and in many ways arose from, what Christians believe about both the individual and society as a whole. But they are only the beginning of our realisation of who we are, and what we need to do. And the more fractious our politics, as in this country at this time, the more important is that task.