

Sunday 22nd June 2024
Order of St John

St Paul's Cathedral

OT: Isaiah 43.1-3a, 9
NT: I John 4.7-16

Earlier this year one of my clergy friends received his British citizenship. Despite all the ups and downs of life in Britain – particularly polarized during a General Election campaign – thousands of people successfully apply for citizenship every year. Now, the citizenship test examined a slightly eccentric collection of facts about the country, from the role of cathedrals through to the wives of Henry VIII. When my friend sat his citizenship test he spoke to the invigilator afterwards to point out all the mistakes in the questions. I don't think you are meant to do that! But they still let him pass, and he is now the proud owner of a UK passport. He may have been the only person at his citizenship ceremony who had a better knowledge of British history and culture than the examiners, but being presented with the documents of citizenship put everyone on a level playing field. No one is 'more British' than anyone else – it is an absurd concept which is only promoted by racists.

There is a lot of talk in the middle of an election about 'British values' and what they might be. Although we all know this phrase, it is difficult to pin down the meaning, because it genuinely does mean something different to everyone. However, in the midst of election polling, I have also become

rather fascinated by a different poll: the World Values Survey. In the UK this is overseen by the Policy Institute at King's College, London, and the results sit at odds with some of the caricatures with which we are presented. For example, in 2023 84% of the UK public say they trust people of another nationality – behind only Sweden (91%), and on a par with Norway (84%). This has risen from 71% in 2005, and is now at a record high. That is just one of many similar statistics in the survey. What it says to me is that there are a number of confused and contradictory messages coming through in political life, but underlying this is the reality that we live in a context of acceptance, trust and inclusion.

I wouldn't go so far as to use the term 'British values', because I think the phrase is flawed, but there is no doubt that we do live in a society where values are celebrated and cherished. What has perhaps changed in the last fifty years is where we derive our values. It used to be that values were dictated by institutions, and that particularly relates to us here today when we look at the motto of the Order of St John: "Pro Fide, Pro Utilitate Hominum", which means "For the Faith, In the Service of Humanity." Values are today defined not so much by institutions, but by culture and experience. Religion has often been used as an instrument of social control, and although some are worried about the release of the grip of religion on the population, I think it is an opportunity both to discover faith and also to understand ourselves. It reminds me of that line from a Christmas carol which I have never allowed to be sung in any church I

have led: “Christian children all should be / mild, obedient, good as he.” Just think of the generations of children who were expected to sing that every year in church. I strongly believe that children should not be mild or obedient, but this became the teaching of the church.

So, what does ‘pro fide’ – for the faith – mean in a secular society? The Order has already wrestled with this: in 2005 the Grand Council issued a Report on ‘Pro Fide’ which highlighted Christian faith and values, whilst also separating the application of these values from particular spiritual beliefs or doctrine. This could be watered down to a slightly limp instruction to be nice to each other, and whilst I have nothing in particular against being nice to each other – in fact please go and do precisely that – we should also not devalue what the word ‘faith’ means in today’s society. Faith can be the determinant which stops values shifting and being relative, and we had an illustration of that in our second reading today. We heard, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” In other words, love is not a loose concept, but it is something we believe is defined by God. Our very definition of love is a reflection of faith, but the application of love is no longer something which we can prescribe through religion.

So, the Order of St John is unashamedly committed to actions which are the outworking of Christian faith. Not everyone in the organization will profess a Christian faith, and in St John Ambulance there are hundreds of

people who profess a different faith or no faith at all. That does not diminish the Christian heart of the Order, but nor does it close St John Ambulance to others. What it does mean is that when we talk about values, they are derived from a particular place. So, they are institutional values, but – perhaps unlike the institutions of the past – they are not monochrome. They are values which can be celebrated and endorsed by different individuals in many contexts in the organization.

In our Old Testament we heard this, “Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them declared this, and foretold to us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, ‘It is true.’” Although these words were written in a particular context, they also tell of a vision of people from different places, cultures, and religions coming together with a sense of unity. This is at the heart of what it means to promote ‘pro fide’ in a secular world.

In 2024 many of the values which are common in society today are centred around inclusion and the belief that we should not be putting up barriers which discriminate against individuals. This can feel very different from the institutional values which were promulgated in previous generations, which implied an expectation on how people were to behave, whom they were allowed to love, and what permission their status or background gave them for participation in society. All institutions did this: these were not values, but rather they were rules.

Values can be the unifying outcome of difference, and these are promoted by our faith, rather than restricted. Values are not a replacement for faith – they are not a religion in themselves – but they pour out of our faith and frame how we live. They unify without discriminating. Within St John Ambulance the values which have been discerned are humanity, excellence, accountability, responsiveness, and teamwork. It is easy to see how these relate to “Pro Fide, Pro Utilitate Hominum”

A secular society is not a society without belief and faith, and indeed it should be a society which promotes belief and faith. It is through our faith that values are discerned. The Order of St John arose from particular moments in history, and the language used will sometimes reflect our origins, but ‘pro fide’ is as relevant now as it was in the nineteenth century. But secular society also tests our faith, and reminds us that even if God is absolute and unchanging, we do not perceive the world in an absolute way.

“Pro Fide” – “For the Faith” Whatever you believe in, our values in the Order are what unite us. “Pro Utilitate Hominum” – “In the Service of Humanity.”