

PARISHES OF
ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH
AND
SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 21st September 2025: 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mere Christianity: Christian Behaviour
(3) Social Morality

On the topic of social morality C.S. Lewis, in his book "Mere Christianity", makes it clear that when Christ preached that we should do as we would like to be done by, He did not expound a new morality. The principle sums up what, deep down, everyone knows, and has always known, to be right. Christianity did not have a detailed programme of how to put it into practice in a particular society at a particular moment. It could not do so; it is meant for all and for all times. A particular programme which suited one place or time would not suit another. That is not how Christianity works: When it tells you to feed the hungry, it does not give you cookery lessons; when it tells you to read the Bible, it does not tell you how to read Hebrew, Greek, or even English. Christianity does not replace human arts or sciences.

When people say that the Church ought to give us a lead, it is important to understand how this should, and should not, be done. It is true that Christians who happen to have the right talents in certain fields should use them when they are required. For example, economists and statesmen should use their whole efforts in economics and politics to put "Do as you would like to be done by" into practice. But some people seem to expect a lead from the clergy in all areas. Yet the primary job of the clergy is to look after and guide the flock towards everlasting life. The tasks in specialised human areas fall on us laymen. The application of Christian principles to, say, the law or medicine, is primarily one for Christian lawyers or doctors.

That said, the New Testament gives us a pretty clear steer of what a fully Christian society would be like. Everyone who can work should work, and work to produce good things. Those in authority should use it wisely and fairly; others should respect that authority. It should also be a cheerful, joyful society, full of singing and rejoicing. Charity is an essential part of Christian morality. In the somewhat disturbing parable of the sheep and the goats at the end of time, charity seems to be the axis on which everything turns. C.S. Lewis says it is not possible to say how much we should give but suggests that it should be more than we can spare. His view is that for many the great obstacle to true charity lies not in our desire for more and more money or ever greater luxury. It is based on fear and insecurity about the future.

A final and difficult matter is that there is one piece of ancient and Biblical advice that modern economic society has failed completely to follow and, indeed, has made impracticable. The ancient Greeks, the Jews, the Muslims and great Christian teachers of the Middle Ages warned against lending money at interest. Yet investment at interest is the bedrock of capitalism. C.S. Lewis says that this is a difficult area. He accepts that lending money at interest may not be wrong and that when previous societies forbade 'usury' they could not foresee the emergence of limited companies and the complex structure (much more complex nowadays than when Lewis was writing) on which capitalism is founded. On this particular point, Lewis concludes: *It "is not a question I can decide on. But I should not have been honest if I had not told you that three great civilisations¹ had agreed (or so it seems at first sight) in condemning the very thing on which we have based our whole life"*

Therefore, we can see that the Christian 'package' of social morality is probably something which we each find attractive in part, but not in its entirety. Perhaps this is what we should expect if Christianity is the total plan for humanity. As fallen beings we have all departed from the plan in different ways and would prefer to tweak it in parts to suit us². Nevertheless, it remains the ideal to which, with the grace of God, we should be striving.

Stephen S.

¹ Lewis did not mention Islam: I added that in

² In a different context Cardinal Hume once pithily said that Catholicism is Table d'hôte, not à la carte!