



The Public Are Expected To Protect From Injury That Which Was Erected For The Public Good...

At the junction of Cirencester Road and London Road in Cheltenham is a Victorian Drinking Fountain. It carries - as you might expect of pious Victorians - a carving of Christ with the woman at the well, and the inscription "*Praise God from whom all blessings flow*". What I especially like about it is this further inscription on its north face: "*The Public are expected to protect from Injury that which was erected for the public good*".

I'd never seen anything like that before, and it stayed with me. It was firm, but inviting. Nothing at all like those municipal injunctions that can seem so finger-wagging: *keep off the grass; No soliciting, loitering or trespassing; do not drop litter; children must be kept on a lead...*

"*The Public are expected to protect from Injury that which was erected for the public good*". I wondered about the Victorian mind that conceived that. And it struck me that such a sentiment seems almost alien in our day. Maybe that is because we tend to be dismissive, in a reactionary way, of some of the dominant Victorian themes of knowing your station in life, of tightly rigid demarcations of class and sex – and of making sure emotions were tightly trussed up and under control. Maybe it's because we have lost a grip on the idea of the *public good*.

Municipal expansion mushroomed under the Victorians, and whilst poverty, exploitation and pollution featured large in that imperial age, so did the growth of schools, hospitals and that great legacy, the public library.

Over the years I have observed in many church people a tendency to limit their Christian thinking to the places where they find themselves being *self-consciously religious* – namely churches and church circles. It's an easy habit to fall into and a darned hard one to escape. You might guess the kind of thing: more concerned about church kneelers than public parks; Sunday School than education policy; precision and purity in worship than, say, affordable access to justice. That's a crude summary, but you get the point.

Those who seek to mock the church often like to refer to Thomas Aquinas and his alleged interest in just how many angels can stand (or dance) on the point of a pin. It's become a metaphor of sorts for wasting time in debating spiritual matters of no practical earthly importance. And a tired cliché it is; but let's not pass over it without a quick look at some of the more interesting answers to this great challenge.

In *Annals of Improbable Research* the answer is given as 8.6766 to the power of 10. Dilbert's character, Dogbert, asserts confidently that the answer is six. In episode seven of series five of the science-fiction *Babylon 5*, the character Byron Gordon says, permissively, "As many as want to". In the novel *Good Omens* it is claimed that only one angel could dance on a pin, Aziraphale, because he'd learnt to do the gavotte. Others have claimed 16, if what we're talking about is an ordinary house pin (darning needles come in with a higher angel-capacity). In the novel *jitterbug Perfume* it is written: "Philosophers have argued for centuries about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but materialists have known all along that it depends on whether they are jitterbugging or dancing cheek-to-cheek".

Behind all this teasing playfulness is a serious point. Our talking about matters spiritual is entirely useless unless what we think (called *orthodoxy*) finds expression in how we live and behave (called *orthopraxy*) – and does so way beyond the confines of churches. Prayer made up of only words and uttered in churches is nothing worth, unless also given expression by our lives, far beyond those same buildings.

We play with fire, and risk a terrible hypocrisy, when our piety is confined to sanctuaries. This is an old lesson, and an ancient insight. One of the reasons I so love this church and community is our dogged determination to avoid such splits. And just sometimes, we manage it.

Why this curious detour? Well, back to the Victorian Drinking Fountain. "*The Public are*

expected to protect from Injury that which was erected for the public good". The 'public good', sometimes termed the 'common good', is a tremendously important idea. It is widely employed by those without any religious affiliation, though it has special place in Christian thought and praxis. The Epistle of Barnabas is often cited as a source: "Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already [fully] justified, but gather instead to seek together the common good."

It seems fair to say that when Christians take the public good seriously their first port of call beyond the church doors is the doing of practical good: feeding the hungry, helping shelter the homeless. Some of the most valuable non-statutory charitable initiatives were established by such people: Barnardo's, the Shaftesbury Society, Centre Point, the Samaritans. What seems to be less the case is of Christians – church people – venturing into the wider fields of what are called social and public policy, and of becoming active citizens in a truly participatory democracy. (As soon as I say this I feel uncomfortable because there are many exceptions, including people here; still, I think it is broadly true).

Let me give an example, of sorts. It is a line of thinking that seems to be rare amongst church people and theologians. Let me express it as a claim. The claim is that central to our belief is the idea of the Incarnation; of God entering in some truly astonishing way, and for an astonishing purpose, the material reality we share of *being human*. We say this was done through the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. It is fundamental to the Christian story. *The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth*. Hold that thought for a moment. Set aside any doe-eyed image of mangers and shepherds and all the meek and mild stuff. Ask yourself, *if this is true, that God entered our humanity, what implications might it have for us, and the common good?* Fast forward to 5 July 1948. The British National Health Service is born. Health care, free at the point of need, for every man, woman and child. Funded from the common public purse: a radical, amazing and a truly *incarnational* piece of legislation and public policy. For the public good, reflecting in social and political terms God's involvement in our material lives.

The NHS is a remarkable and marvellous conception, a credit to the United Kingdom and its people. And yet one being injured by muddled public policy and the interests of private providers and their shareholders. With too few of us actively engaged in its protection. *"The Public are expected to protect from Injury that which was erected for the public good"*.

And what about education? Here, the Church has an impressive early record, and the Church of England in particular. Then came legislation, starting with the Forster Act of 1870, which began the process of establishing free education for all. Another example of the outworking at the level of state and society of the insights and meaning of the Incarnation – of God taking us seriously, without favour. Yet, like the NHS, education, too, is subject to conflicting and changing policy, sometimes driven by ideology, and sometimes by ideology that simply does not truly support the idea of universal provision or believe that all our children are of equal worth because of what we dare to believe God did for us in Christ. Created for the public good. Something it is our duty to protect from injury.

I don't mean to sound like another municipal finger-wagging injunction. And I reproach myself for not more often, more vigorously, involving myself in opposition to the injury being done to essential public services – and not least by the savage cuts in public spending. We need help in tracing the lines and implications from what we believe (or say we believe) about God, beyond words to action; that we might indeed *protect from injury that which was erected for the public good*. And, once embarked on this practical believing, it is amazing how one's vision widens. For where do we stop, or can stop? Was not our planet, in its way, along with all creation, brought into being for the common good? Suddenly, taking all these things far more seriously, seeking truly to protect them from injury, isn't just a matter of enlightened self-interest. It is a matter of thankfulness and gratitude.

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