

Matthew's weekly musing, 20th November 2020

Sheep and Goats



Now here's an interesting C19th man. I'll put his name later in the Musing so you can have fun working out who is behind all that beard. I begin with him because the current director of the V&A, Tristram Hunt, has just written a biography, and a long review has set me musing.

Our subject was born 200 years ago this month in Prussia. He was born into a strictly Calvinist family, meaning an intense, biblical form of Christianity.

His family can be described as capitalist, and 'suffocatingly bourgeois'. They were textile merchants. A move to the UK brought them to Manchester.

Before saying more, here's part of this week's gospel, Matthew 25:

- 31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.
- 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Our man's thinking may have been informed by this key teaching from Jesus. See what you think as you read on:

From an early age he found the human costs of his family's prosperity hard to bear. Aged only 19, he wrote of the plight of factory workers "in low rooms where people breathe in more coal fumes and dust than oxygen", and lamented the creation of "totally demoralised people, with no fixed abode or definite employment".

After university in Berlin he was sent to work at the family mill in Salford in the epicentre of the industrial revolution, where he saw how unregulated capitalism entailed sustained dehumanisation: "Women made unfit for childbearing, children deformed, men enfeebled, limbs crushed, whole generations wrecked, afflicted with disease and infirmity, purely to fill the purses of the bourgeoisie," as he put it in his masterwork, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845).

He is of course Friedrich Engels, and his radical eloquent thinking tends to be hidden as he is the one who plays “second fiddle to so splendid a first violin” as Karl Marx. Now don’t stop reading!

Engels was one of the formative voices of early socialism, as well foundational to feminism, gender equality and colonial liberation.

If your blood pressure is high, here’s the calming, balancing insight you may need from Engel’s biographer:

“Engels was a figure of profound historical and philosophical significance. Yet what I discovered, as his biographer, was that his vision of socialism could also be richly uplifting: the grisly, corrupt, anti-intellectual egalitarian Marxism of the 20th century would have horrified him.

“The concept of a socialist society as a realm of equality is a one-sided French concept,” he said. Instead, Engels believed in cascading the pleasures of life – food, sex, drink, culture, travel, even fox-hunting – across all classes. Socialism should not be a never-ending Labour party meeting, but a life of enjoyment. The real challenge of living in Manchester was that he could find no “single opportunity to make use of my acknowledged gift for mixing a lobster salad”.

Phew!

Perhaps in the light of this we can see that the word ‘socialism’ has a benign beginning, and that over the last 179 years it has found both releasing and crushing interpretations. Our welfare state and NHS and universal education have part of their origins in the socialism of Engels.

So how to make a connection with our gospel passage?

What I take from our gospel passage is an imperative for a realm of holiness that involves my awareness to the poor and underprivileged.

It involves my responsibility for how those who depend on me find their lifestyle is enhanced or diminished.

It involves not only my awareness but my pro-action towards those less fortunate.

For me Jesus offers no manifesto for any political or economic system, but He does offer the means for evaluating how these systems are working.