

## CELEBRATING HUMAN RIGHTS

Next Wednesday, 10 December 2008, is the 60th anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This was a historic step forward for the world community. It came in the aftermath of a terrible war involving some of the most massive violations of human rights which the world had ever seen. The Declaration itself is admirably short and to the point, and its very first words put in a nutshell why it was so important to take this step:

*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.*

This anniversary is especially important for us in Strasbourg because the Council of Europe, which was founded just a few months later, in May 1949, was based on the same commitment to human rights. The founders saw clearly that if – after so many destructive wars – there was to be any hope of lasting peace in Europe it had to be built on the firm foundation of respect for human rights.

So it was that in 1950 the Council of Europe countries adopted the European Convention on Human Rights, a kind of European version of the Universal Declaration. And in fact they went further than the United Nations by setting up a European Court to make sure that governments really did respect the rights they had signed up to.

These were great achievements, born out of the shock and horror of the Second World War. We are right to celebrate them.

More than that, we are right to celebrate them as Christians. I am glad that the Conference of European Churches has seen the importance of this anniversary and has produced the cards that you have all received this morning – reminders of the intimate relationship between human rights and the Christian gospel. (Present the bookmark and the post-card.)

So that's why I'm talking about human rights this morning. Not because it's a fashionable modern cause, but because it's a deeply Christian cause.

Why are human rights so important for Christians? There is a clue in that sentence I quoted from the opening of the Universal Declaration. Human rights are based on a belief in the “inherent dignity” of each and every human being. Now for Christians the “inherent dignity” of human beings isn't just a nice, uplifting idea. It comes straight from our belief that God created human beings “in his own image and likeness”. You could hardly imagine a greater dignity than that.

And it comes also from our belief that Christ died to save us all, without exception. None of us deserves his forgiveness, but he offers it to everyone, even to the worst of sinners. And so it's very important that human rights are for everyone, even for the worst of criminals. Indeed, one of the tests of whether human rights are respected or not is whether they are guaranteed even to those who have committed terrible crimes. That doesn't mean they can't be

punished, but it does mean they must have a fair trial and that they cannot be submitted to inhuman or degrading treatment.

Sometimes Christians feel a bit uncomfortable about the language of “rights”. After all, vis-à-vis God we don't have any rights at all, only duties, the responsibilities he has laid upon us. So Christian theology doesn't use the language of rights. But when it comes to human society, we see that the social dimension of Christian ethics is very much about standing up for the rights of others and making sure that our society is a place where people's dignity is affirmed, and where they can grow up into that full human flourishing which God wills for us.

But then, sometimes people object that there's nothing about human rights in the Bible. Well the fact is that there is plenty; it's just that the Bible doesn't use the term “human rights”.

Take the Old Testament law. To us the Law often seems very harsh, and it prescribes draconian punishments which we certainly wouldn't see as compatible with human rights. But of course you have to put it in the context of its time, and when you do this you can see that it was, for its time, very enlightened. Just to give one example, it accepts slavery, but tries to regulate it so that slaves have some basic rights and are not subject to cruel and arbitrary exploitation.

The prophets often denounce violations of human rights: try reading Amos, for example. Or, if you would like a bible text that sums up the message of human rights, you could try Isaiah 1.17:

*Cease to do evil, learn to do good;  
seek justice, rescue the oppressed;  
defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*

And because this is Advent, let's not forget that John the Baptist was a powerful advocate of human rights. Not only did he condemn exploitation of the poor and the defenceless, but he also used his freedom of speech to criticise those in power - and he paid for it with his life.

Or take the Book of Revelation. Among other things, this is a denunciation of the oppressive and exploitative Roman Empire, a power which arrogantly trampled on people's rights – not least by denying to Christians the right to freedom of religion.

Then again, Christians sometimes worry that human rights is a secular ideology, not a specifically Christian one. They point out - quite rightly – that, more than anything, the modern human rights movement is a product of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, and that indeed human rights often had to be fought for in the teeth of hostility from the Church.

Well, we had better admit that Christians have sometimes been very slow to see the human rights implications of their gospel. But that doesn't take away from the fact that human rights thinking grew out of Christian soil. Secular lawyers and philosophers, whether they liked it or not, were drawing out the implications of the Christian belief in the equal dignity of all human beings. Even when they rejected the Christian faith, they were drawing on a Christian heritage.

Moreover, it's worth noting – and this is a rather forgotten bit of recent history – that the Universal Declaration might well not

have come into being at all without the determined efforts of a small group of ecumenical Christians in the 1940's who, by their persistent lobbying, managed to convince the statesmen who were responsible for setting up the United Nations that the new framework for international peace would not work at all unless it was based on an agreement about basic rights.

Now all this doesn't mean that Christians are going to feel bound to defend everything that is said or done in the name of human rights. Much talk about human rights in the Western world is too individualistic. Human rights have become something I demand for myself, whereas Christians will want to put more emphasis on defending the rights of others, and especially the rights of the poor and powerless, and the rights of vulnerable minorities.

We have also developed what we might call a “consumerist” approach to rights. We tend to turn everything which we want for ourselves into our “right”. So people end up thinking that freedom means freedom to do whatever I want.

On the contrary, human rights does not mean, and never has meant, “I am free to do what I want”. On the contrary, it is all about balancing my freedom against the freedom of others, and against the interests of the community as a whole.

But whatever our criticisms of some things which are claimed in the name of human rights, I hope there is no doubt that, as the Conference of European Churches is reminding us at this

anniversary time, the struggle for human rights should be a central part of Christian discipleship in the world today. As the Bible insists time and again, our God is a God of justice, and he calls us to work for societies in which his justice reigns. By getting involved in human rights movements, Christians can witness effectively to that justice which is God's will for our world, and which is indeed part of God's very being.

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60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*