

THE TABLET

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WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

One teenager awaiting the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI in the rain in a muddy field in September said the occasion “felt a bit like Christmas”. For those taking part, and maybe for some watching on television, there was a sense of having stepped out of ordinary time into something special and a bit magical – or mystical. At its core, this moment was an encounter with Christ and what that does is to stand the world’s order of priorities on its head, when the last shall be first. The Pope lingered to talk very personally to elderly people at the retirement home he visited, and again and again to children and young people. And this is the reversed order of priorities that Christmas brings, as congregations contemplate and adore once more the lowest of the low in his sacred crib – a newborn child of refugees with a price on his head. “Christmas is undoubtedly the toughest time of year for the homeless,” says Keith Fennell, the director of Anchor House, in the East End of London, on page 12 of this edition. And the situation for many people will get worse, as savage government cuts eat into the incomes of the poor. Christmas can make “tough going” tougher still.

Back in September, Pope Benedict left the British with a lingering question: what are the most important things in life? He asked it in a way that bypassed the usual barriers to critical self-examination at the behest of another, and the question was underlined by his speeches, his actions and his approach to people. In response, he seemed to sense in the

British people an openness to faith that perhaps they had not perceived in themselves. Against the easy secular assumptions of most of the media, Pope Benedict saw an attraction to things of the spirit and a willingness to listen. Perhaps the first opportunity to test that will be Christmas 2010, a day when more than a third of the population, according to a recent survey by the think tank Theos, claims it will be going to church.

If they are looking for sentimental escapism, however, they will have misunderstood the message. Archbishop Bernard Longley of Birmingham said he felt the papal visit would give the Church courage to “witness to the truth of the Gospel and to speak out against all that demeans human beings within our society”. This is the crucial bridge between spirituality and social justice, without which Christianity becomes a mere sounding brass or tinkling cymbal. It needs a relentless determination to identify every way in which humanity is being given less than the respect to which it is due. Human beings are demeaned and marginalised by poverty in all its manifestations – unemployment, homelessness, welfare dependency, loneliness and depression – as well as by its escape routes – drugs, alcohol and criminality. If church celebrations of the Nativity do not convey the promise of liberation from these forms of bondage, it is failing to deliver the best Christmas gift of all.

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY

The university tuition-fee controversy has been dominated by two factors – politics (with particular reference to the Liberal Democrats) and student protests. Both are important issues, although not the most important. Whether Britain’s third party can recover from the damage it has suffered is obviously a key question for its future. The party gave away a huge hostage to fortune when it publicly committed itself against any increase in student fees before the last election. Meanwhile, the sometimes riotous student protests have been widely hailed, even by the police, as a taste of things to come as more and more sections of the population are angered by the impact of government spending cuts.

Nevertheless, there are underlying issues which, in the long term, may affect the quality of life in Britain more profoundly than either of these pragmatic concerns. About them there has been little serious debate. They were not discussed in the report of Lord Browne, former head of BP, whose report on student tuition fees has become the basis of government policy.

The think tank Ekklesia and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales have both raised these deeper questions, not just about how universities are to be paid for but, more fundamentally still, what their purpose is. Many universities regard the raising of tuition fees as inescapable because of the Government’s decision to axe funding across a wide range of subjects, such as the humanities and the arts, leaving them to sink or swim according to supply and demand. The decision to concentrate public subsidy on subjects like science and engineering, which are useful to industry, was “utilitarian”, the Catholic bishops said, pointing out “the negative impact this

move will have upon society as a whole”. Ekklesia said the move represented the abandonment of the idea of a university as a “public good” – a shared resource from which the whole of society could benefit.

These are voices crying in the wilderness. The view that a degree is a benefit only to the person who is awarded it is widespread throughout the debate. There is little recognition of university education as a collective resource. The only general value the Government seems to recognise is an economic one, its direct contribution to profitability. This completely ignores another kind of wealth, sometimes called social capital, which represents all the knowledge accumulated over centuries about how to be a civilised society with a culture that enhances life in the broadest terms. Of this knowledge, universities are sacred guardians. Even unemployed arts graduates share in it. Universities should therefore be able to look to the general taxpayer for assistance and support across the entirety of what they do. They should not be left exposed to the ravages of market forces, which know the price of everything but the value of nothing.

A clearer idea of what universities are for would also help to answer some of the other questions that have been left unasked – such as whether the goal of having half of all young people in university education is obtainable or even desirable, and whether the proliferation of specialisms into ever more obscure vocational or technical areas is appropriate or beneficial. But without some “idea of a university”, to use Newman’s famous phrase, the debate over tuition fees will remain like *Hamlet* without the Prince – missing its essential point.