

FAITH IN PUBLIC LIFE

Desmond Rea - February 2008

1. An Attempt At Definition and Two Health Warnings

Faith is defined in the concise Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as:

- complete trust or confidence;
- firm belief, especially without logical proof;
- a system of religious belief;
- things believed or to be believed;
- duty or commitment to fulfil a trust, eg to keep faith.

Public is defined in the concise OED as:

- of or concerning the people as a whole (... the public interest);
- of or involved in the affairs of the community;
- of or relating to a person in his or her capacity as a public figure.

In this series I assume the organisers are concerned with:

- **the belief of a person in his/her capacity as a public figure**

Now for the **health warnings** :

- I do not contend that a person of another **faith** or no **faith** at all can perform a public role as effectively and efficiently as a holder of the Christian **faith**. I do contend that a Christian should be prepared to be there other things being equal. Coming from a denomination where one's

life was influenced by the ministeries of Sidney Callagan, Eric Gallagher and George Good that should not surprise anyone.

- In my current role I am mindful of - and here I quote – “of my representative position on behalf of the Northern Ireland Policing Board (Board) in making public comments of a personal or political nature touching on the Board or its statutory functions.” In only one area during my tenure have I, knowingly, deviated from that position, viz **dealing with the past**, and I have done so with the permission of the Board and on the understanding that I am speaking for myself.

2. Some More Thoughts on Faith

Faith is defined in the letter to the Hebrews in this way “**faith** is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11.1) which Moffatt translates “Now **faith** means we are confident of what we hope for, convinced of what we do not see”

In the Hebrew tradition; **faith** and **hope** go together; to repeat “**faith** is the assurance of things hoped for”. **Faith** looks towards that which is “not yet”; towards something which is desirable and promised and hoped for.

Someone has accurately, succinctly yet eloquently said that “**Hope** is stronger than **memory**. **Salvation** is stronger than **sin**. **Forgiveness** is stronger than **bitterness**. **Reconciliation** is stronger than **hatred**. **Resurrection** is stronger than **crucifixion**. **Light** is stronger than **darkness**. ... **Hope** is stronger than **memory**”.

It has been the hopefulness of **faith** that has sustained people in the very dark days of “the Troubles”. **Hope** is located in that part of us which is dissatisfied with what is, which looks for, seeks and works for something better.

In the Greek tradition, **Faith** is the “conviction of things not seen” that is, that reality which is more enduring than duplicity, lies, propaganda and sound bites.

3. What To Say Tonight?

When thinking about what I would say tonight, I said to a close friend, the Rev Dr John Dunlop:

- why did I ever agree to do this?
- secondly, is the theme not a strange theme for Lent?

To the first question, he replied: only you can answer that; and to the second question: think about it; Lent is preparation for Easter, it is about Jesus going to Jerusalem into an environment which was dangerous. Faith exercised in public life takes us into the same uncomfortable territory which Jesus entered.

I have thought about it, and I am going to share that discomfort with you ... it happens that I am currently re-reading Luke’s Gospel.

4. Lent—What It Is About?

Luke 4 (13 and 14) – when the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in

their synagogues, and everyone praised him. It was a ministry which was marked by both controversy and success, but it was a not a place of physical danger.

The people in his home synagogue were first pleased with him but then when he began to remind them of how the prophets, in the past, had been sent to people outside the boundaries of their own community, in the case of Elijah to the woman in Zarephath in Sidon and in the case of Elisha to Naaman the Syrian. It was citing material from their own tradition which indicated that God was interested in people outside their tradition.

It was then that they rose up with anger. He was driven “out of the town” and they were about to kill him. (Verse 28). It is a dangerous thing to break ranks with community solidarity.

The person of **faith**, who has responsibilities in public life, cannot be solely concerned with the interests of one part of the community. Public service takes such a person outside their usual comfort zones; out of unreconstructed solidarity with only one part of the community, and people within that part of the community may well feel betrayed.

Having chosen the first disciples (5) and healed many, he began to upset the keepers of the tradition, the rules and the regulations viz the Pharisees; such that they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to him. The Pharisees had a noble tradition behind them, but they had become bent in on themselves and had become judgemental and exclusive. It was very clear to them who belonged and who did not, and with the powers of excluding people from the community, they exercised considerable power.

But Jesus stressed (6, Verse 10): Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you (7, Verse 27).

After he had fed the 5,000, he asked the disciples “who do you say I am?” Peter said “the Christ of God” (9, Verse 20). Jesus warned them not to tell this to anyone” (9, Verse 21)

And he added”the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (9, Verse 22) “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men (9,Verse 45)

The disciples, especially Peter, concerned for his well being, tried to dissuade him; he was rebuked in the strongest terms.

Then **Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem** (9, Verse 51) and in the environs of the city and the temple engaged in a provocative ministry which resulted in his betrayal by one of his colleagues, if we may call Judas by the name of colleague.

- **... to his betrayal:** “and Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard, and discussed how he might betray Jesus” (22, Verse 4).
- **... to the Last Supper** 22, Verses 7-38).
- **... to his arrest** – “am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs?” (22, Verse 32).

- **... to be accused falsely** - He was then accused falsely and witnesses were brought to tell lies and a “rent the mob” was organised.
- **... to his appearance before Pilate** – “I find no basis for a charge against this man” (23, Verse 4) – and he sent Jesus to Herod. That day Pilate and Herod – former enemies became friends; Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate and he decided to grant the demands of the chief priests, the rulers and the people.
- **... to be crucified** - Jesus was crucified; the people stood watching and the rulers even sneered at him” (23, Verse 35); “the soldiers mocked him” (23, Verse 36). But on the third day “he is not here; he has risen” (4, Verse 6).

And so Jesus:

- having sorted out his priorities during the temptations;
- moved from Galilee, where he was safe and successful;
- began to challenge the religious establishment;
- moved towards Jerusalem, the centre of power where he found a working alliance between the religious and political establishment;
- to a marriage of convenience between Herod and Pilot, who believes Jesus is innocent, but acts expediently.

5. Where Do People Of Faith Stand With All This ?

- for is our society not also marked by exclusion and duplicity and violence? People of faith who have been given responsibility, have to live constructively and honourably in that unsafe environment; especially those in the public life of politics or quasi politics.

- Pilate was there to keep the peace. Except he not only hands Jesus over but he washes his hands of it and blames others; it was a short term prudential judgement which resulted in Jesus being killed.
- Which brings me to our recent history and our imperfect world: in the troubles some 3,524 people have been killed, of those 1,521 were Catholics, 1288 were Protestants and 715 were not from Northern Ireland*, 302 police officers were killed, 46,753 lay people and over 9,000 police officers were injured. It is generally agreed that approximately 60% of the victims were killed by Republicans, 30% by Loyalists and 10% by the British, Irish and Northern Ireland security forces.
- And a world laden by ambiguity: the ‘peace process’ has been defined by Sinn Fein as “we were not terrorists; we were soldiers; this was a war; the war is over, and, the prisoners of war are released”. And they are. Some would argue that this was unjust: I would argue it was necessary and it has taken us to where we are today.
- Since it was a war, as defined by Sinn Fein, lots of nasty things have happened on both sides: informants and collusion on every side.
- The Peace Process has all been about pragmatism; trade offs. The morality of it may concern us, **but it is working** ... the truth is that no democratic society knows how to deal with terrorism, and at the same time preserve civil liberties; that does not mean that “everything is permissible”; but the USA and Britain are now finding that combating a well organised terrorist group within the borders of a nation state presents acute difficulties.

- The Anglo-Irish Agreement had lots of subtle meanings hidden between the lines, for it was important at that stage that people be kept on board and that the process was kept open. The Methodist Church commented at the time “too often since the Agreement was signed London and Dublin have evinced different perceptions of what it means.”
- Some of Tony Blair’s statements at the time of the referendum following the GFA/Belfast Agreement promised more than seemed possible. The process was marked by smoke and mirrors: remember the 5 *blackboard* promises at Coleraine.
- And with Eames/Bradley there is probably more **good** ambiguity to come. They afford us the opportunity to break with the past and to let the future determine our lives. They will have to address such issues as:
 - the parity of victim question and (its corollary)
 - the parity of perpetrator question.

All in a **parcel**, where everyone gains.

Hopefully, also we are reaching the point of realisation that **it is not justice we now need but mercy**. It is perhaps time to become preoccupied with our future, what’s left of it and, more importantly, that of our children.

6. And So Back To Our Theme

- ... to “faith in public life”, or the belief of a person such as me in my role ...one could stand aside in the comparative safety of the private sector or the comfort zones of unreconstructed solidarity with one or other part of the community. Public life, I would argue, for people of faith, does not offer that kind of comfort.
- it is about managing complexity and ambiguity in a complex and ambiguous world;
- it is about seeking to induce rationality, and not contributing to irrationality;
- it is about treating people in a way you would want them to treat you and, at the same time, not being a pushover. Despite the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was no push over;
- regardless of what has hit you, or you know is about to hit you, or you don't know what is about to hit you, getting on with the job regardless, and doing it as effectively and efficiently as you can.
- It is about seeking to create a future which is not bound by the deficiencies of the past. Remember **faith** and **hope** go together and, for the Christian, **hope** is stronger than **memory**.

7. A WORD OR TWO ABOUT POLICING

Sir Robert Peel's Nine Principles of policing ;

1. to prevent crime and disorder, as an alternative to their repression by military force and severity of legal punishment;
2. to recognise always that the power of the police to fulfil their functions and duties is dependent on public approval of their existence, actions and behaviour and on their ability to secure and maintain public respect;
3. to recognise always that to secure and maintain the respect and approval of the public means also the securing of the willing co-operation of the public in the task of securing observance of laws;
4. to recognise always that the extent to which the co-operation of the public can be secured diminishes proportionately the necessity of the use of physical force and compulsion for achieving police objectives;
5. to seek and preserve public favour, not be pandering to public opinion; but by constantly demonstrating absolutely impartial service to law, in complete independence of policy, and without regard to the justice or injustice of the substance of individual laws, by ready offering of individual service and friendship to all members of the public without regard to their wealth or social standing, by ready exercise of courtesy and friendly good humour; and by ready offering of individual sacrifice in protecting and preserving life;
6. to use physical force only when the exercise of persuasion, advice and warning is found to be insufficient to obtain public co-operation to an extent necessary to secure observance of law or to restore order, and to use only the minimum degree of physical force which is necessary on any particular occasion for achieving a police objective;
7. to maintain at all times a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and that the public are

the police, the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence;

8. to recognise always the need for strict adherence to police-executive functions, and to refrain from even seeming to usurp the powers of the judiciary of avenging individuals or the State, and of authoritatively judging guilt and punishing the guilty;
9. to recognise always that the test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, and not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with them.

Do his Principles of 1829 resonate with you?

The Report Of The Independent Commission On Policing For Northern Ireland – the Patten Report - was about addressing the following:

- “The consent required right across the community in any liberal democracy for effective policing has been absent.”
- The commitment to a fresh start gives NI the opportunity to take practice from elsewhere and lead the way in overcoming some of the toughest challenges in modern policing”.

Both have been the preoccupations of the PSNI and the Board. Much has been achieved. I will be pleased to say something about the achievements in the questions and answers.

8. IN CONCLUSION

The peace has (almost) been achieved. Now we must **live** it.

Robert Louis Stevenson said “I believe in the ultimate decency of things.”

And that is **faith**.

* All figures taken from Malcolm Sutton’s “AN INDEX OF DEATHS FROM THE CONFLICT IN IRELAND”, CAIN, UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER