

Bringing Justice to the Nations
A Talk for Lent 2008
Sir Paul Girvan

INTRODUCTION

[1] At the outset I would like to thank Canon Mann for inviting me to talk to you this evening. When he first approached me I was more than a little daunted. What could I say and how could I who so often wrestled with the problems of faith and with doubts say something meaningful or inspirational? The task imposed required me to thinking deeply about many issues of belief that I have in the past only half articulated to myself. It forced me to confront the question of the depth of my beliefs and it forced me to ponder on the questions “What does it really mean to be a Christian? What is the Christian message? What does it really mean to be a Christian and a judge?” The preparation of my talk was truly a Lenten task. As I thought about these questions I began to discover within my own mind what my faith actually means and what it demands of me. I had to confront and find an answer to questions and doubts that have formed stumbling blocks to my faith and I suspect that of many others. For this I am grateful to Canon Mann. Let me stress at the outset that although I am a judge my talk this evening is not in that capacity but as a Christian who happens to be a judge. Nothing that I say is to be taken as in any way expressing a judicial view.

THE JOURNEY OF FAITH

[2] I have taken as the title of my talk words from the Book of Isaiah “Bringing justice to the Nations.” There is in Isaiah Ch 35 a striking image of a redeemed world. In Isaiah’s memorable words “A highway will be there: it will be called the Way of Holiness.” The metaphorical image of a highway, a path, a way is one that recurs in the Bible. The Christian life is, indeed, as Canon Mann described it on the first evening of this series of talks a journey of faith. Throughout both the Old and the New Testaments many of the great events of faith occurred on actual journeys – in the Old Testament the nomadic wanderings of the Patriarchs moving about with their tents and flocks, the descent into Egypt, the Exodus and later the Exile and, in the New Testament, the journey to Bethlehem, the flight into Egypt, Jesus’ peripatetic ministry, the Way of the Cross, Paul’s journey to Damascus and the journeys of Paul and the Apostles, all actual journeys and all playing significant parts in the unfolding story of revelation. It is of the nature of a journey to have

a destination and it is of the nature of a journey that it throws up challenges and difficulties, stumbling blocks and apparent road blocks. On a journey we see things from different angles. At times we can feel lost and disorientated. But a journey opens up new horizons, new possibilities. My talk this evening is a kind of journey or perhaps, more accurately, some reflections on our journey of faith, a reflection of the role of justice in Christian faith, a reflection on those stumbling blocks and challenges that lie across our path towards faith and on finding ways of facing up and seeing beyond those difficulties.

THE STORY OF MARCEL CALLO

[3] Let me begin with a journey I recently undertook. In September I was privileged to be able to go to France to take part in what is called a *stage*, in effect an opportunity to observe at close quarters the operation of the French court system and the administration of justice in France. I spent part of my time in Rennes, the ancient capital of Brittany, an elegant small French city with a long and distinguished history in French Christianity. Rennes has a number of lovely old churches one of which is the church of St Aubin. It is a high Gothic building with tall narrow strikingly blue windows which spread a rather mystical, diffused blue light throughout the building, windows and a building which call to mind the first verse of George Herbert's great poem "The Windows:"

**Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word.
He is a brittle crazy glass:
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.**

On one side of the church there was a roughly hewn sculpture of the figure of a prisoner in chains transcendently lit by rays of sunlight falling through the brittle blue glass of the windows. It is a statue of a man called Marcel Callo. The name of Marcel Callo I did not know and I found the statue intriguing. Later I came across a biography of Marcel Callo in one of Rennes' excellent bookshops. His life was on one level a tragic and short one. He came from a devout Catholic Breton family. One of his brothers was a priest. As a young man he became active in the organisation called Jeunesse Chrétienne Ouvrière, whose members were from ordinary working families and who sought to bring to the workplace their Christian lifestyle and principles. Although France is perceived to be a Catholic country it is in fact a secular state with a strong element of anticlericalism and an antipathy to the Church in some sections of the

population. Bearing witness to the faith in the workplace was not without its difficulties and challenges to Marcel.

[4] France was occupied in 1940 and in due course young French men were forced to go to Germany to work in the German war industries. Many French men absconded and went into hiding to avoid the call up. Others joined the Resistance. Marcel, although strongly opposed to the Nazi regime, decided that he would use the opportunity of working in Germany to spread his faith and bear witness to his Christian convictions. While in Germany he came to the attention of the Gestapo because of the zeal of his faith. He was perceived to be a risk to the regime because, according to the records, he was “too Catholic.” He then began his own version of the Way of the Cross, a journey into the dark heart of the Nazi Reich, transported from one labour camp to the next and being subjected to increasingly harsh conditions until finally he was transported to Mauthausen Concentration Camp where he died a slow death as a result of appalling ill treatment, starvation and ill health. Throughout his ordeal he retained his faith and behaved in an exemplary Christian way seeking to bring comfort and consolation to his fellow inmates and to bear witness to Christ in a place that seemed God forsaken. Marcel’s experience paralleled that of another Christian martyr, the Vietnamese Paul Le-Bao-Tinh who died in 1859 and who described an imprisonment akin to that of Marcel in words which are rather humbling to those of weaker faith:

The prison here is a true image of Hell: to cruel tortures of every kind – shackles, iron chains, manacles – are added hatred, vengeance, calumnies, obscene speech, quarrels, evil acts, swearing, curses, as well as anguish and grief. But God who once freed three children from the fiery furnace is with me always: he has delivered me from these tribulations. In the midst of these torments which terrify others I am by the grace of God full of joy for I am not alone – Christ is with me.

The prisons in which Marcel and Paul lived and ultimately died were places that were a perverse reversal of the world of the Christian described by St Paul, a world in which the Christian must live in faith, hope and love, a world where the good and the noble are to be pursued, a world pervaded by the sense of God’s presence.

After the war the cause for Marcel’s canonisation began and he was beatified in October 1987. Although in France his name is not commonly known outside Brittany, he has been an inspiring figure in Germany and Austria and a number of Churches there are dedicated to him.

[5] The story of Marcel Callo touches on many of the themes I want to develop to-night, the themes of human justice and injustice, of human laws, our understanding of God's justice, the question of the apparent silence of God, the nature of human evil and our response and God's response to it.

THE CALL TO JUSTICE

[6] The injustices and the crimes against humanity meted out by Nazi Germany, like those of other evil regimes and political systems like Stalinist Russia or Mao's China, graphically call to mind the words of Isaiah in Ch 59:

Their deeds are evil deeds and acts of violence are on their hands. Their feet rush to sin and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are evil thoughts, ruin and destruction mark their way. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads.

“There is no justice in their paths.” Justice and the call for justice and the doing of justice resonate through the pages of Isaiah:

Learn to do good, seek justice, aid the oppressed, uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow.

A King will reign in righteousness, a ruler will rule with justice.

Listen to me my people, hear my nation, the law will go forth from me, my justice will become a light to the nations, my own will bring justice to the nations.

And then again in Amos we find these magnificent words:

Let justice roll like a river, righteousness like a never ending stream.

[7] The message of God's love of justice and his demand for men to do justice do not originate in Isaiah but are evident from the beginning of revelation. In Genesis we read how God chose Abraham so that he might instruct his children and his household to keep the way of the Lord “by doing righteousness *and justice*.” Like so many scriptural words the word “righteousness” has become overlaid with centuries of misuse. It carries to the modern ear more than a hint of *self* righteousness. In simple terms it means living aright, doing what is right, seeking to uphold what is right. And it is intimately connected with justice which is putting into

action the doing of what is right. It is clear from the Bible that God wants us to strive for human justice, in the short as well as the long term, in this world and not just in the next, from the perspective of time and space not in infinity and eternity. God creates divine justice but only we can create human justice acting on behalf of God but as humans in our human society. St Teresa said that in this world God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet. The human justice that God calls on us to do must be done by *our* hands and *our* feet must tread the paths of justice and make straight the paths which are crooked. God's command to Abraham to do what is right and just is expanded in Hosea 2.19-20:

I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion

Right living and true justice must be inspired by and worked out with love and compassion.

READING

[8] I want at this point to mention a book which I would thoroughly recommend "To Heal a Fractured World" by Sir Jonathon Sacks, the Chief Rabbi in Britain. It has a subtitle "The Ethics of Responsibility." In it he deals with the Hebrew concept of justice. Before considering what the Chief Rabbi has to say on the Jewish concept of justice let me digress a moment. In the past there was a tendency in many Christian circles to retreat into a spiritual and intellectual fortress which shut out the outer world and excluded or discouraged the reading of religious and spiritual writings from other religions or traditions. For my part I have always regarded such an approach a negation of the spiritual openness which lies, to my mind, at the heart of Christ's teachings. Christ came to open our hearts and our minds, not to close them. What traveller would pull down the shutters of his train and close out the passing beauties of the world. I have found enormous enrichment and enlightenment in the works of writers from different traditions and religions. For Protestants there is a wealth of wisdom and beauty in the works of the great Catholic writers and thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas, St Catherine of Siena, St Teresa, St Therese, St John of the Cross and Cardinal Newman. The two encyclicals of Pope Benedict *Deus Caritas Est* (God is love) and *Spe Salvi* (We are saved by hope) are models of scriptural exegesis and profound thinking on the role of Love and Hope in Faith expressed with an admirable clarity. Catholics will find enormous value in the works of writers like C.S.Lewis, Prof Barclay, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Bunyan, Michael Mayne, the late Dean Emeritus of Westminster, the great Anglican poet George Herbert and many others. Much, too, can also be

gleaned from the writings of and about other great religions. The insights and teachings of Buddha, the teachings of the great Taoists, the writings of the Dalai Lama, the poetry of Kibral Khibran and the writings of the great Sufi mystic Rumi I have found fascinating and enlightening. Not least Christians can learn so much from the great Jewish writers and thinkers not least of who is Sir Jonathon Sacks. The treasury of Jewish spirituality from Old Testament times to date provides a source of inexhaustible inspiration and insight for the Christian reader even if there is fundamental distinction between Judaic and Christian thinking and beliefs on the role of Jesus.

HEBREW JUSTICE

[9] In the first two chapters of his book Sir Jonathon deals with the Hebrew concept of justice and makes the point that the justice for which we are called on to work has different aspects. Hebrew distinguishes between *mishpat* and *tzedakah*. *Mishpat* is what we can call distributive justice - the rule of law through which disputes are settled by right rather than might, the weighing of evidence and the hearing of both sides. Law establishes a set of rules binding on all by means of which the members of society act in such a way as to pursue their own interest without infringing the rights and freedoms of others. A law governed place is a place of *mishpat*. But such a concept of justice does not of itself create a decent society. To it must be added *tzedakah*, distributive justice. A society might fastidiously observe the rule of law yet contain gross inequalities leaving many without the basic requirements of a dignified existence. There must be justice not only in how the law is applied but also how the means of existence, wealth and God's blessings are distributed. And there must be justice in the content of the law. And love and compassion must inspire the spirit of the law. Justice in society goes beyond merely the running of an efficient legal system. Justice also involves justice between individuals, acting justly to those close to you and to those affected by our action and our attitudes.

[10] It is, thus, clear from the Bible that we are all called on to work for the creation of justice and a just society. As a judge I have the privilege and the particular duty of ensuring the fair and proper administration of retributive justice and thereby help to advance the creation of a society based on proper distributive justice. In a special and particular way judges are called on to advance a divinely commanded duty: "My own shall bring justice to the nation." Amos puts it simply: "Hate evil, love good, maintain justice in the courts." The Christian judge must approach his task in the light of that mission. All judges have that duty, whether they

are believers or not. Being a Christian and a judge brings a faith inspired focus to the task.

[11] Lord Bingham, the Senior Law Lord, in the 6th Sir David Williams Lecture on the topic The Rule of Law given in Cambridge in November 2006 ended his address by saying that the judges are not, as they are sometimes seen, mere custodians of a body of law and prescriptive rules but are with others the guardians of an all but sacred flame which animates and enlightens the society in which we live. I would go further and say that it is not merely an almost sacred flame. It is a flame that God lit at the time of the creation of mankind. It is a flame which should burn in every heart. Judges have a special duty to ensure that it is never quenched. As a Christian charged with judicial duties I must fulfil the call of God to do justice.

A JUDGE'S DUTY

[12] In carrying the torch bearing that flame a judge must exercise his judicial functions with scrupulous care, with total impartiality, with absolute fairness, unmoved by improper pressures. The path he treads must be straight and never turn into the crooked paths of which Isaiah speaks. But a judge applies the laws of man and a judge cannot act as God. While he judges by the evidence, the evidence of everything relevant to ultimate judgment will never be wholly visible to a man and is only known to God. Jesus counselled us to “judge not lest we be judged”. It is a text that seems to undermine the whole concept of the judicial function but it does not. Jesus reminds us that ultimate judgment lies with God who knows all. We cannot make absolute moral judgments about our fellow man. The longer I sit as a judge the more I realise that this is so. Every serious criminal trial is a human tragedy. The victim of crime and his family are so often left damaged or bereft and longing for justice to try and undo the damage and have the injustice they have suffered avenged. The position of the accused himself is often tragic, also. In some instances a momentary decision can plunge his life and that of his victim and his own family into an abyss of sadness. In other cases one sees defendants who have lost all sense of human or divine values and are prey to vices and addictions. Many defendants come from dysfunctional backgrounds, subject to malign influences, to alcohol and drugs, left adrift in a society which seems to have lost its moral compass. As a judge I am painfully aware of the limitations of human judgment and of the limitations of human laws and of the dangers of legalism.

THE DANGERS OF LEGALISM

[13] In Judaism at the time of Jesus the religious establishment had by an excessive concentration of the fulfilment of the legalistic requirements of the Mosaic Law turned religious faith into an exercise in ritual without a heart. St Paul in his Letters demonstrated the inadequacy of the Jewish Law as a basis of a real relationship with God. While he was talking of the *Jewish* law a fortiori the fact is that no human legal system can lay the real basis of a spiritual life. Human legal systems are essentially negative in nature. They are designed to regulate the individual's conduct and rights in such a way that society can operate effectively. Even the incorporated European Convention on Human Rights concentrates on restraints on the state and public bodies rather than creating positive civic or spiritual duties for the individual. The law has nothing to say about personal love or compassion. The Good Samaritan would have broken no law by passing by on the other side. The father of the prodigal son would have been within his rights to ignore his returning errant son. The law would not compel you to give the shirt off your back to the poor man or to turn the other cheek. Law does not lead to love or to a sense of compassion nor can love and compassion be legislated for. For example, the law may define the legal nature of marriage and it may lay down the rules for the contracting and dissolution of a marriage but it does not provide the content. The law provides the framework. The individual must make the marriage work and gather from it its blessings.. No Act of Parliament, no judicial pronouncement can turn the individual into a loving, compassionate, just person seeking to do right to his fellow man or to God. Law provides a framework for a civilised society but within the frame it is for the individual to paint the picture of his life. A framer is not an artist. To paint a picture of your life that is a thing of beauty you need paints and brushes and inspiration. For the Christian the paints are found not in the laws of man but in the words and laws of God. The inspiration needed to inspire the artist in the movement of his brushes is the inspiration of that spirit of holiness which we call the Holy Spirit.

[14] Judaism, it has been said, is not a religion of systematic theology. One famous rabbi said that Jews talk more *to* God than *about* God. Perhaps over the centuries Christians have talked too much *about* God and not enough *to* God and have talked too much and acted too little. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees for their pettifogging legalism was harsh. Yet the legalising tendency in religion was not long in reappearing in Christianity. The search for the definition of beliefs, the talking about God rather than to God, brought with it the lawyer's methodology. Lawyers like to define and refine their terms often to the point that the final outcome is far removed from the initial intent. Lawyers formulate

legal consequences for breaches of rules introduced to ensure the acceptance of the definitions. This tendency became marked in the development of Christianity and in Church history. And that it brought with it many of the ills which afflicted Christianity for centuries – the oppressions and cruelties inflicted on those who queried the definitions or sought to reinterpret them. Institutional Christianity made an idol of a dogmatic certainty and absolutism which lacked humility and compassion. It forgot that when the Lord manifested Himself to Moses in the Burning Bush he would not define himself “I am who I am. YAWEH.” The historical outcome of institutional Christianity for long has troubled me and has on occasion made me and no doubt others to doubt the truth of a faith that could lead to the terrible consequences that often flowed from it. Jesus Himself said “By their fruits you will know them.” If these were the fruits of Christianity, did that not say something about the religion founded by the Founder Himself? We must be honest and recognise that my difficulty is a difficulty for many and it forms a stumbling block for the world on the path to faith. In Ambassador Campbell’s talk we touched on the question why Europe has turned away from the Christian route. The Ambassador gave an interesting explanation but one other possible explanation lies in the fact that it was Europe which suffered so much from the consequences of bad or twisted Christianity and of legalistic Christianity, from a Christianity that turned Christ’s teachings on their head and did the opposite of what Christ asked of his followers. The answer to this stumbling block to faith is that what happened in institutional Christianity was manifestly not what Christ willed. It was the antithesis of what He taught and died for. The institutional outcome poses questions about the institutions not Christ who condemned the pharisaical approach, its legalising tendency, its lack of humanity and humility, its empty ritualism and its undermining of the true Fatherhood of God who is the Father of *All*. The failings in institutional Christianity flowed ultimately from a lack of faith and trust in Christ, his assurances and his call to the Kingdom of God. What *is* inspirational in Christian history is not the history of the institutions which can often appear sadly dispiriting but the lives of the followers of Christ who took Him at his word, those who have given sustenance to the hungry and thirsty, helped the ill and the weak, visited the prisoners, clothed the naked, released the captives, in other words the men and woman like St Francis, St Clare, Wilberforce, Florence Nightengale, Mother Teresa, St Vincent de Paul and Marcel Callo, men and women like Senator Wilson and Sydney Callaghan in our own generation who by their lives and witness redeemed Christianity from the sins of the institutions and showed how Christian action can manifest the presence of God in the world much more effectively than empty preaching without

action or formulaic recourse to half understood, misinterpreted or misapplied doctrines. St Augustine describes the daily life of the true Christian thus:

The turbulent have to be corrected, the faint hearted cheered, the weak supported; the Gospel's opponents need to be refuted, its insidious enemies guarded against; the unlearned need to be taught, the indolent need to be stirred up, the argumentative checked; the proud must be put in their place, the desperate set on their feet, those engaged in quarrels reconciled; the needy have to be helped, the oppressed to be liberated, the good to be encouraged, the bad to be tolerated; all must be loved.

Elsewhere St Augustine summed up the Christian message in a few but infinitely significant words:

Love and do what you will.

This statement is deceptive in its apparent simplicity. It requires of one a rigorous analysis of ones actions and ones attitudes. One must analyse ones motives to see whether one is acting out of true love for the other or on the basis of a personal agenda. And true love for the other is not based on empty emotionalism. Love is the one most overworked and misunderstood words in the language. In truth St Augustine's aphorism provides no easy pillow on which to repose.

DANGERS WITHIN THE CHURCH

[15] St Augustine spoke of the insidious enemies to the gospel, the enemies within. If we look back to the early Church we can see already the prototypes of those insidious enemies of the Gospel of whom St Augustine talks. In the figure of Judas we see the person who, for corrupt purposes, is prepared to betray what is good and pure. Some modern commentators interpret Judas differently suggesting that Judas was politically motivated, that he was a zealot who was disappointed by Jesus's apparent lack of political activism and that he betrayed Jesus either out of a sense of disappointment or in order to push Jesus into a reaction which would advance the zealots' programme. If, indeed, that was the true nature of Judas's betrayal then, here, too we see a prototype of another kind of insidious enemy. Then there was Simon Magus, the father of simony, who sought to buy spiritual powers. How often has that figure re-emerged in the pages of institutional Christianity? Nor should we forget that Paul began life as the bigot Saul, so certain and convinced of the rightness of his beliefs that he was willing to participate in the

murder of religious opponents until his revelation on the road to Damascus. Saul, too, was type which re-emerged so frequently in the pages of religious history, caused such human devastation and defaced the face of religion. And still does. But two other more frequently forgotten figures appear in the pages of the Acts of the Apostles, significantly a man *and* a woman, who wanted to join the early church but secretly held back in what they should have given to help the advancement of the Gospel. These figures from biblical history, Ananias and Sapphira, are rarely talked about now but their story is replete with meaning. They represent a kind of universal type. There is something of that type in every Christian. The holding back of oneself, the failure to be fully committed, the reservation or withholding of full faith – which of us cannot see that there is more than a hint of Ananias and Sapphira in ourselves? They are the true enemy within. But the Judases, the Simons, the Sauls, the Annaniases and Sapphiras have walked through the pages of Church history in the company of the Peters and the Pauls, the Mother Teresas and the Marcel Callos, the Wilberforces, the Lord Shaftsburies, the Senator Wilsons and the Sydney Callaghans. The history of the Christian Church is a history lived out in a human context marred and mired by human failings. We should not let its shortcomings, grievous though they have been, put up a road block or blind us in our vision of the way ahead, that vision that inspired “the good and faithful servants.”

TWO JUDGES

[16] Having spoken of the duties of a judge I want to touch on two famous men who throw some light on the proper fulfilment of judicial office. Let me first mention Sir Thomas More, the Man for all Seasons. More, as we all know, died a martyr's death going to his death because he stood firm in his belief that Henry VIII was wrong to declare himself the head of the Church in England and wrong in his rejection of the role of the Pope as head of the Universal Church. More was Lord Chancellor and as such the holder of high judicial office. His life was marked by integrity, incorruptible honesty in an age of corruption and personal sanctity. He has been declared a saint and John Paul II declared him patron saint of politicians. He is an exemplar of political and judicial integrity. We can see now that he was not without serious flaws in his approach to religious matters and in relation to his selective belief in freedom of conscience. As a child of his time he was a committed believer in the duty of the state and the Church to extirpate heresy by the use of torture and the stake and he was zealous in his pursuit and persecution of Tyndale, the Protestant translator of the Bible. What we learn from the life of Sir or Saint Thomas More is that in every age Christians can fail in their duty to build a just society, that the demands of

the institutions can lead one astray, that the task of achieving justice is ongoing, that one must always be ready and able to question any practice or belief that works injustice or is of its nature unjust. We see, too, that even the holiest of men may be tainted by the false orthodoxies of his age. And what might be the false orthodoxies of our day? Might they be pervading moral relativism, the acceptance that all life choices and beliefs are of equal moral value, the elevation and idolatry of the Self, a disproportionate and debasing focus on the erotic at the expense of true love, a loss of the sense of the sacred, a concentration on rights over moral responsibility? Might they include a loss of the sense that each of us is individually and separately responsible, that is answerable to Some One other and much higher than ourselves ?

[17] Secondly, let me turn to Pontius Pilate who conducted the most famous trial of history, that of Jesus. In his conduct of the trial Pilate fulfilled none of the requirements demanded by justice. He failed to investigate the case against Jesus properly; he sought to evade his duty by throwing Jesus back to Herod to be tortured; he decided the case against Jesus on politically expedient grounds and to appease the crowd orchestrated by His accusers. Although he personally did not believe in the guilt of the accused he was willing to sentence him to an excruciating death. Some modern commentators consider that the Gospels paint Pilate in a favourable light in order to increase the guilt of Jesus' Jewish accusers, on a proper analysis Pilate emerges as a moral coward who was willing to do what he knew to be an injustice to an innocent man on the grounds of expediency. He is an exemplar of a morally bankrupt judge. Throughout history he had many followers, in the show trials of the Communist world, in the courts of Nazi Germany, in the courts of Vichy France from where Marcel Callo came, in the tribunals of Revolutionary France. And so the list goes on.

A CHRISTIAN INJUSTICE

[18] I mentioned the matter of the accusation of the guilt of the Jewish people in the Crucifixion story. Few stories in the history of the Christian world are as shameful or as sad as the story of the injustices perpetrated in name of Christ against His people. Jesus was a Jew. He came from a people who had received a revelation of God unique to them, a people who were the guardians of a boundless treasury of religious tradition and learning. If you read Sir Jonathon Sacks' book you will see how the ethical teachings of Jesus were derived and developed out of that great treasury. The visitation upon Jesus's people of the despicable and abominable pogroms, massacres, expulsions and persecutions to which over the centuries they were subjected by the Christians of Europe was an

unspeakable crime. The Holocaust, although perpetrated by a pagan Nazi regime, was the culmination of centuries of anti-semitism which had festered in Christian Europe for centuries. It was the ultimate unspeakable act which found its origin in an interpretation of the story of Jesus that wholly missed the point and was entirely false. Jesus died not because the Jews as a people killed him. Why he died was the result of the outworkings of human evil, of moral corruption and cowardice, of inhuman and ungodly power structures, of the misuse of political and religious powers, of a rejection of the godly and holy values preached by Jesus that challenged and threatened those powers and their values which effectively rejected the true image of God. In short he died because he was the victim of that force which we traditionally call sin, that force at work in human nature which opts for the opposite of godly and holy values. Jesus said "What you do to the least of these you do unto me." In a terrible way the same forces that crucified Jesus crucified the Jewish people in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Marcel Callo and Paul Le Bao Tinh in the squalid wickedness of their prisons. And while those things were happening the Pilates of the world averted their gaze and daintily dried their hands. It was not the Jews who crucified Jesus. It was Man. Man continues to do crucify those other Christs, the least of His of who Jesus spoke. Man continues to fail to do justice.

THE CRUCIFIXION

[19] Pilates' sentencing of Jesus led Jesus to start that saddest of biblical journeys, the Way of the Cross, culminating in the Crucifixion, the central historical fact on which Christianity is based. In considering the story of the Crucifixion in the Gospels we are brought face to face with the question of God's justice, a question which arises in the story of Marcel Callo and in the story of so many lives. The Gospels do not relate the events of Good Friday in the same way. In Matthew and Mark at the ninth hour Jesus cried out "My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me?" and when He had cried again in a loud voice He gave up his spirit. Luke says that His last words were "Father into your hands I commend my spirit." John says that at the end He said "It is finished," bowed his head and gave up the spirit.

[20] That cry from the Cross of seeming despair is a cry that echoes across the ages. It is the cry of the ill and the bereaved, the enslaved and the oppressed, the tortured and the maimed. In the twentieth century it is the heart rending cry that went up from Auschwitz and the Gulags. In our own generation it is the cry that went up from Rwanda and Bosnia and still goes up from Darfur. It is the cry of Job. Why does man suffer, why does evil seem to prevail, why does God appear to be silent? Abraham

himself at very beginning of the Jewish faith posed this very question to God Himself:

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?

This is the central question of human existence. It is the question that so often seems to go unanswered that it forms a stumbling point to faith, *the* great stumbling block. It is a question that I repeatedly ask as must any thinking Christian or Jew. “Every difficulty skimmed over” wrote the great composer Chopin “will be a ghost to disturb your repose later.” A thinking Christian has to face the question and find an answer. If we do not, then our faith will evaporate when we are first challenged by the appearance of apparent unmerited injustice.

GOD’S JUSTICE

[21] What we do know is that God demands justice of man and man is made in the image of God. As well as carrying within himself a tendency to opt for the ungodly, what the theologians describe as original sin, the better side of man has an innate sense of fairness and justice. Unjust societies carry within themselves a fatal flaw and over time such societies ultimately disintegrate and fall because injustice creates instability and arbitrariness that makes impossible in the long term the survival of a society based on injustice. The hard wiring of the sense of justice and fairness in human beings cannot be accidental. It points to a justice beyond mere human justice. If we believe that God is good and demands justice of us, if we believe that goodness cannot but be just, we must believe that God is just and that His justice must ultimately prevail. This is not to say that we are always convinced that this is so. Our faith is constantly challenged. Our faith is often a struggle against the seeming evidence.

WRESTLING

[22] There is in Genesis a strange and rather haunting story, that of Jacob wrestling all night with a stranger who wrenched his hip. Jacob would not let go of the stranger unless he blessed him. The stranger asked his name and giving him his blessing saying “Your name will no longer be Jacob but Israel because you have struggled with God and men and have overcome” The stranger would not reveal his name. Jacob called the place Paniel (meaning “the face of God”) “because I saw God face to face” he said “and yet my life was spared.” The story is one of the foundational stories of Judaism, the very source of the word Israel, meaning “he struggles with God.” That story tells us much. We struggle with God, we struggle with faith in God, we struggle with the apparent

inexplicable unmitigated evil and injustice that occurs in human existence. But to wrestle with God, to question God is an engagement with God at close quarters. When we wrestle we hang on to the Person with whom we are engaged. And we do not let go. Jacob was wrestling to wrest a blessing from God. Part of our relationship with God involves the kind of struggle that the story tells us about. And the story shows that there is nothing wrong with that. God expects it and in the struggle we come face to face with God. And as Christians we see the Face of God in Jesus. In the story Jacob was said to have struggled with men as well as God. We struggle with man and with his flawed nature. And we struggle against man who so often tries to pull us away from God, pull us away before we can get our blessing for another aspect of the story is that Jacob hung on to God till he got a blessing. Jonathon Sacks in his analysis of this story writes:

“This is a wrestling match each of us has to undergo when evil threatens or tragedy strikes. Faith is the refusal to let go until you have turned suffering into a blessing.”

[23] We have a wonderful and dear friend, a real life “high toned Christian lady,” who some 51 years ago gave birth to a little girl I shall call Annie. Annie was seriously brain damaged as a result of exposure to German Measles during the pregnancy. Annie is one of those people who touch everyone with whom they comes into contact in a very special way. She was recently quite ill. When I wrote to our friend to tell her how we were thinking of them and remembering them in our prayers her letter in response was one of the most moving I have read. Let me read you some of the words Annie’s mother wrote:

Annie has been the love story of my long life. She has taught me the meaning of love – she exists only to love and be loved and in her unique imperfection she fulfils God’s will these 51 happy years, better than any of us.

I know of no better example of how from what seemed to be an injustice of nature, what seemed to be a personal and family tragedy, what to many would have seemed an unanswered prayer, our wonderful friend by faith, commitment and love wrested a true blessing which changed and strengthened her and helped to make her into the wonderful, loving person that she is. And that letter shows in those few lines the value and sacredness of human life in all its stages of development. There are no children of a lesser God.

CHRIST THE BRIDGE

[24] St Catherine of Siena, twenty-fourth child of a family of twenty five, largely self taught from a relatively humble background, was one of the most remarkable women in the history of the Christian Church who took head on the corruptions and evils of her schismatic age, wrote one of the outstanding works of Medieval Literature *Il dialogo* (“The Dialogue”) Her life and a work that earned her the status of Doctor of the Church. In “The Dialogue” she paints a magnificent and sustained portrayal of Jesus as the Bridge. When the traveller on his journey of faith reaches the apparently insuperable barrier created by the apparent absence of justice and sense in existence in order to cross that barrier the traveller needs a bridge. As Christians we believe Jesus is that bridge that carries us across that barrier. Catherine puts in thus:

Look at the bridge of his only begotten Son and notice its greatness. Look! It stretches from Heaven to earth, joining the earth of our humanity with the greatness of the Godhead. And why should He have made of himself a roadway? So that in truth you may come to the same glory as the angels. But the Son having made of Himself a bridge for you could not bring you to life unless you make your way along that bridge.

HOPE OUT OF DESPAIR

[25] Jesus in the Passion and the Crucifixion came face to face with the same struggle we all face, in his case in particularly terrible way. He, too, had to wrestle with pain, fear and the challenge to faith. He met his death because of the injustice of men. He came face to face with the ultimate reality, the ultimate outcome of injustice and from that injustice God worked a greater different justice in the Resurrection. The words of grief and despair combined a cry against pain and injustice with the implication of something else. Those words “My God, my God why hast Thou forsaken me” were words from Psalm 22. Verses 1 and 2 of that psalm contain the cry of humanity for justice, for an explanation why God appears to ignore our cry

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? Oh my God, I cry out by day but you do not answer, by night I am not silent.

But the psalm ends in a vision of faith and despair turns into hope:

The poor will eat and be satisfied; they who seek the Lord will praise Him. All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to Him and all the families of the nations will bow down before Him and all who go down to dust will kneel before Him.

[26] Every line of the bible, particular the words attributed to Jesus must be pondered on and are full of meaning. Jesus in quoting the opening verse of the psalm was not pointing in the direction of despair but to the ultimate prevailing of God's justice. By opening the psalm he was pointing to its end. His words of apparent abandonment and despair were not words of despair but of faith and hope in the ultimate goodness and justice of God.

SPE SALVI

[27] Pope Benedict in his recent Encyclical Spe Salvi (In hope we are saved) dealing with the role of hope in the Christian life visits the question of divine justice which is central to the Christian vision of hope:

God has given Himself an “image”: in Christ who was made man. In him who was crucified the denial of false images of God is taken to an extreme. God now reveals his true face in the figure of the sufferer who shares man's God forsaken condition by taking it upon Himself. This innocent sufferer has attained the certitude of hope: there is a God, and God can create justice in a way that we cannot conceive, yet we begin to grasp it through faith. Yes, there is a resurrection of the body. There is justice. There is undoing of past suffering, a reparation that sets things aright. For this reason, faith in the Last Judgment is first and foremost hope – the need for which was made abundantly clear in the upheavals of recent centuries.

The Pope continues:

I am convinced that the question of justice constitutes the essential argument, in any case the strongest argument, in favour of faith in eternal life. The purely individual need for a fulfilment that is denied to us in this life, for an everlasting love that we await, is certainly an important motive for believing that man was made for eternity; but only in connection with the impossibility that the injustice of history should be the final word does the necessity for Christ's return and for new life become convincing.

THE LAST JUDGMENT

[28] The Pope's words show that a world without divine justice would be a world without ultimate responsibility. The true meaning of responsibility is being answerable for something to somebody. The iniquities of the truly evil regimes which we have seen in history and the evils than men do arise when man loses that sense of ultimate responsibility, of being answerable, of having to face the consequences of this evil. If we shut the door in the face of God and close Him out of the world then we open the door to absolute irresponsibility from the world. We are answerable to no-one. The river of justice and the stream of righteousness become literally dammed. The Christian's life is a life lived out in the context of eternity and in the context of an ultimate responsibility. And here we come to the last things Heaven, Hell and Judgment. For modern Christians the doctrine of Heaven is attractive and understandable but the doctrine of Hell appears incredible and ugly, a disproportionate outcome to evil. It is stumbling block to the belief in a loving and caring God who is Father of the Universe. The Medieval Schadenfreude in the suffering of the damned resulted in the painting of many works of art that portrayed a kind of ghastly and never ending torture chamber in the sky. Even the wise and otherwise compassionate St Thomas Aquinas described one of the joys of heaven being the sight of the damned in pain. This vision of Hell was metaphorically burnt into the psyche of the Christian mind. But the image has distorted the image of God and paints a picture of divinely inspired sadism. The true nature of Hell, however, is a rejection of the God of Love, a turning away from the Face of Love. For those who have rejected and lost the capacity for love, compassion and humanity (whom we have indeed seen across the pages of history past and recent), those who opt for a life based on hatred and contempt for the godly and the holy, those who have destroyed within themselves the potentiality of humanity to draw close to the true source of all love Heaven holds no attractions. Rather than turn towards the Face of that God of Love they turn away. They turn to stare across the wastelands of their life, across the bleak void of their lost potential. Hell is not God's torture chamber, an Auschwitz in the ether. Hell is the total absence and rejection of the godly. Thus the Christian notion of Hell is the reverse of the barbarous man-made hells where men mete out their wicked cruelties on their hapless victims. The ultimate absence of God and that ultimate bleakness are of the individual's making. As Jesus's life and words and death made clear, it is God's will that all should seek and find the true Kingdom but they must enter it freely.

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

[29] Finally, as I approach the end of my journey this evening let me take you to the words of one of the Jewish morning prayers which begins with these words:

How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel. As for me in Your great loving kindness I will come into Your House I love the habitation of Your House, the place where Your glory dwells.

As a rabbinical commentator on this text has pointed out we use tents when we are on a journey. We have a dwelling place where we feel at home. Here again we come back to the image of our life of faith as a journey which is not a nomadic or aimless wondering across the shifting sands of an uncharted desert of relativism or unprincipled pragmatism but a journey towards a destination, to a House built on firm foundations. The Jewish prayer has a Christian echo in a lovely post-communion prayer in the new Church of Ireland Prayer Book which contains these words:

When we were still far off You met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living He declared Your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.

Here we see ourselves as travellers, far from our destination, trying to find our way home, being sought out by God and accompanied along the path by His Son and finding our ultimate destination in Our Father's House, in the words of the Jewish prayer the habitation of His House, the place where his glory dwells. This prayer always reminds me of another travel story, the episode on the Road to Emmaus, one of the most evocative of the Gospel stories and one that has inspired some of the greatest Christian art. It is the story of two of the disciples meeting Jesus after the Resurrection in the failing light of the evening and ultimately recognising Him when they broke bread together. This is another story of a journey with a revelation. The fact that this episode occurred in the evening is not without significance. The revelation enabled the disciples to face with rekindled faith the coming darkness of the night, the apparent dark hopelessness of the situation. The psalmist many years previously had written

“For you darkness is not dark, and night shines as the day; darkness and light are the same.”

This image of darkness and light is most tellingly used in Jesus' own words

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”

And Paul in his letter to the Colossians wrote

“God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness to share in the inheritance of the kingdom of light.”

Jacob had his revelation at Paniel. Those disciples on the Road to Emmaus had had a revelation of the face of God in the face of Jesus. After that experience the darkness could be faced with faith and hope. And may it be so with us. And when we, too, come to be judged may God be able to say of us that we walked along the Highway of Holiness, that we were His own and that we helped to bring justice to the nation.