

**WHEN YOU ARE DYING:
A Personal Exploration of Life, Suffering and Belief
Additional Chapters**

BY PHILIP WETHERELL

Published by Gilead Books at Smashwords

Copyright ©Gabrielle Grace 2011

All rights reserved.

These Additional Chapters are provided as a free resource, the print edition of the book When You Are Dying is available from most online retailers.

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. Although this is a free book, it remains the copyrighted property of the author, and may not be reproduced, copied and distributed for commercial or non-commercial purposes. If you enjoyed this book, please encourage your friends to download their own copy at Smashwords.com. Thank you for your support.

[Contents](#)

[Chapter 1: Christians and Other Faiths](#)

[Chapter 2: Community](#)

[Chapter 3: Homophobia](#)

[Chapter 4: Peace](#)

[Chapter 5: Memories](#)

[Chapter 6: Sermons](#)

[Chapter 1: Christians and Other Faiths](#)

In my early years I lived close to the equivalent of today's Heathrow Airport – Southampton Docks. Excluding ferries to Europe, I was told, over half those who left or arrived on these shores came through Southampton. We knew the day and time by the colour of the funnels seemingly gliding over the rooftops.

I have only one childhood memory of anyone of a different colour and none of other faiths. Immigration had created our society over centuries, but apart from Jews, no significant numbers of other faith communities were known outside small areas of London and other major cities. Southampton was then just a transit point.

I returned to my home town in 1980 as Religious Education Adviser in a team of seven. I ran a Resource Centre and was available to all schools. The team could offer support to the whole city because the reduced population of the now combined city-centre parishes. Bombing made the first impact, followed by mass exodus to new Council Estates – and 15,000 Asians, mainly Hindu and Sikh. One Primary School had just one white family, and was famous for its staged celebration of Divali. The parish sold one of its little-used churches to a Sikh group – the first Church of England worship centre to be sold for use by another faith.

Before then I had worked in Leicester. A local story about the Indian community was that Leicester City Council had advertised in Idi Amin's Uganda, suggesting that asylum seekers should not come to their city as there was no room for them. Arriving in Britain, they knew the name of a destination other than London. They joined the largely Indian community which lived beyond what was then called the 'Khyber Pass' – a flyover which led to a street full of wonderful clothing stores and sweet shops. I got involved because I had sent a donation from a local charity. To avoid accusations of favouring family or home village I was asked to become Secretary of the group managing the fund. I made visits to all the Temples (sadly, mostly old school rooms or dis-used churches rather than anything resembling the glorious ancient temples in India). There was also a fund-raising event in which thirteen different ethnic groups were each given thirty minutes to perform a demonstration dance and then show a simpler version for everyone to join in.

Different parts of many of our cities would give a different experience of other faiths, but even in visits to nearly fifty countries on behalf of church agencies I had little contact with or discussion about other faiths and particularly about Islam. Thirty years after being in Leicester things have changed. Muslims are much more obvious, partly because they reacted to negative public feeling particularly following suicide bombing in London. For seven years from 2000 I caught a bus to work in south-west London and got off opposite Brixton mosque. Every time radical Islamists were in the news I could feel hostility on the response was always an increase in the obvious identity, particularly in the dress of women, of those proud to be Muslims. This increased hostility even more, and it even affected me as I had a beard without a moustache and often wore an Afghan hat – the seat next to me stayed empty for a long time.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams has encouraged sensible debate on the relationship between religious and secular or state law by beginning to look at how some aspects of Muslim Sharia Law might be used by agreement among that community in Britain. The Archbishop delivered the lecture in his academic style on how faith communities with their own internal laws and regulations (some already accepted within the British system) should relate to civil law. What got the press going was that he made Sharia Law his example. They largely ignored the text of the lecture given by Rowan Williams, preferring, just as many do when using the Bible, to take words and phrases out of context. The Sun suggested that he had said Muslims could ignore British divorce laws, which was nowhere in the text. The same newspaper implored us to "bash the bishop" and put two page 3 girls outside Lambeth Palace distributing leaflets against the Archbishop. Even the BBC joined in, by interviewing the same bishop who was already trying to divide the church on the issue of homosexuality (see the chapter on

Homophobia). Sadly, this is what we might expect from the media on a day when there was little other news, suggested one of the Archbishop's supporters on that same BBC Radio 4 Sunday programme. Another comment saw elements in the press of anti-clericalism, anti-intellectualism and racism. Support from the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, also given on the same programme, was largely ignored in the rest of the media. In July 2008 the Lord Chief Justice also suggested Sharia Law could be used that way and a commentator from the Muslim community pointed out that 90 percent of such cases were resolving marital issues and there would be no conflict with national law.

Just two weeks before the Archbishop's lecture the Pakistan born Bishop of Rochester, on the conservative right of the church, had spoken of no-go areas for non-Muslims, castigating successive governments for failing to promote "an integrated vision for Britain based on its Christian foundations" and suggested the multiculturalism being pushed by a secular government has had disastrous consequences. Again the press picked this up, with the right-wing tabloids in particular enjoying doing so, though no real evidence of his claim appeared.

The debate around multiculturalism, religious pluralism and nationalism is now perhaps more intertwined than ever. But much of the debate we hear is misinformed and based on pre-existing prejudices. Perhaps because they know that their readers are even less informed than them, the media had been as happy to find support for Bishop Nazir-Ali as they were to find opponents to Archbishop Williams. Through supporting a Pakistani-born Christian Bishop they could claim they were not being racist, anti-Islam or anti-immigration. 'Britishness' came to the top of the agenda. Being 'too nice' to Muslims was, in the mind of most of the press, just another failure at top level.

Faith, behaviour and conflict

The link between Islam and terrorism has been high on their agenda since the destruction of New York's Twin Towers and the London suicide bombings. Anyone travelling by air in recent years will have experienced the results of increased anxiety about repeat incidents. And it is true that in addition to the terrorism experienced in western societies in USA, UK, and Spain, millions more are affected by radical Islamists; women and girls were particularly discriminated against during the Taliban rule in Afghanistan and many Iraqis are victims too. In the UK too we hear stories of forced marriages and family violence, particularly when a young woman has acted independently in leaving or forming a relationship in a way not acceptable to the wider family. But we can find similar stories within other faith groups. A recent report on at least 5,000 children being isolated, tortured and even killed by Christian groups in Nigeria after being denounced as witches(1) shows there are still elements within Christianity which justify violence (see the chapter 'War and Peace for more on this). Within Hinduism the scriptures (both the Vedas and Upanishads) are still seen by many to justify, if not to be the cause of, the caste system and the inhuman treatment of the outcast Dalits(2). In Judaism, radical views on possession of the West Bank have also led to occupation and the ill-treatment of resident Palestinians.

Followers of all faiths can attempt to fulfil their hope for domination through conflict, and 'faith' issues at international level have been one the causes of incidents across

history. The British civil war in the C17th was an example of dispute between parties of Christians, but the Inquisition in Roman Catholic Europe was different. During the Spanish Inquisition some Spanish Jews fled to Turkey, where even today there is a Spanish-speaking Jewish community. For Jews this was a repeat of their experience at the time of the Crusades, when after their experiences of rape, murder and pillage they, as well as Orthodox Christians, welcomed the Muslim victory. The mixture of religion, culture and politics are not only obvious in the Shia/Sunni divisions in Iraq. In Britain it was difficult from the Reformation until the C19th to be anything but 'Church of England' in order to succeed in many roles in society; Jews were discriminated against in much of the Christian world, often connected with local business success but condemned for being the killers of Jesus. A new book by Kevin Spicer(3) deals in depth with the cooperation and support given to Germany's National Socialism by Roman Catholic clergy. At the same time Japanese Buddhists supported their own government's militarization. Sikh/Hindu, Sikh/Muslim and Muslim/Hindu conflicts in India have erupted at times in history too, despite the peace that is proclaimed in their religious texts.

No faith is especially condemned by these examples – but they show that distortion of the principles of each faith is equally possible. The distortion can be caused by external but related factors from tribalism and racism to sexism and other examples of ignorant selfishness. But these external factors do not excuse the mis-use of scriptures or other faith principles in acting against other communities.

All conflicts have a mixture of causes, and people of all faiths can turn to scripture to justify their actions, even if there are other real motives. It is important therefore to look at Biblical and other faith documents. One of the similarities between conservatives (this oddly includes 'radical' Islamists) of all faiths is that they take selected sections of ancient documents and apply them literally to present times. Some Christians and some Jews justify the occupation of the West Bank from Old Testament words on the presence of God on earth. For them, God will not return again until the 'Promised Land' has been reclaimed. Most Christians will disagree and see the promised return in more personal terms. In the Old Testament there are many nationalistic and militaristic sections which suggest Yahweh wants his 'chosen people' to destroy other faiths adherents. Deuteronomy 13 tells of how those who have occupied the 'Promised Land' should treat "base fellows" who have drawn people to "other gods": "...you shall inquire and make search and ask diligently; and behold, if it be true and certain that such an abominable thing has been done among you, you shall surely put the inhabitants of that city to the sword, destroying it utterly, all who are in it and its cattle, with the edge of the sword" (Deuteronomy 13:14-15). This was something apparently carried out after the success of the siege of Jericho: "And they utterly destroyed all that [was] in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword" (Joshua.6:21). The reasons for people believing that God supported or justified their actions are complex but show the links there were between a people's origin, their community survival and their faith. They were all part of surviving in an uncertain world. The 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland showed the same links closer to home and our time – the faith identities 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' were used as much as 'republican' and 'nationalistic' to describe communities which felt isolated and threatened; perhaps

relatively higher percentages actually attended church, but both sides over-emphasised selected sections of experience, history and faith to back up their cultural concerns.

Inter-faith in scriptures

A careful look at the words selected to be the 'scripture' in all faiths shows a much broader view of relationships as those faiths developed. Muslims would not accept that the Qur'an was 'selected', and in Christianity and other faiths too many people believe that words came directly from God. For me it is more helpful to see knowledge and ideas developing but, regardless of views on that, we have to start with what was written.

a. Jewish and Christian scripture

In the case of the Old Testament it is useful to understand that the books were not written in the order they are presented, with the primitive story of Sampson and Delilah among the earliest.

Understanding of god grew slowly, as did that of the way people should deal with each other. The Old Testament is certainly not always negative to outside people, with the story of Hagar perhaps the most significant (Genesis 16:1-16, 21:8-21). This Egyptian slave girl is taken on by Abram to bear children. Tension between her and Sara leads her to flee once she realises she is pregnant. Significantly, she is in Sinai, where laws acquired by the people of Israel included "you shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry" (Exodus.22:21-3). In the words of Trevor Dennis(4), she "is just one of four people in genesis to hear the language of promise from god's own lips, and she a woman, a slave, an Egyptian."(p.67) a great nation will result from the birth of her son, Ishmael. Dennis sees this as one of a number of annunciations in scripture, but then goes further. "for the appearance of Gabriel to marry, Luke took the Hagar of them at least, for Hannah will be another. In one sense, if we compare her to marry, the honour done to Hagar is more remarkable." (p.69) this is because it is god himself and not an angel, who speaks to Hagar. And this was the abused slave, not of the chosen nationality or faith.

We can find the same in the New Testament too. The good Samaritan is the hero often seen to demonstrate the 'principles rather than rules' aspect of Jesus' teaching, but it is not just about denigrating those religious leaders obsessed with purity. It is also about how.

Someone from a rival group has a better understanding of how god wants us to be. In Luke 7:1-10 we hear of the good centurion who had built a synagogue for the local Jewish community. His servant needed healing but all Jesus was required to do was to "say the word" and he would be healed. Jesus says "I tell you, nowhere, even in Israel, have I found faith like this" (v.9).

Another encounter came from breaking the rules of two faiths. Again it is a Samaritan, but this time a woman at a well who Jesus asks for water. They both break their rules in having a dialogue which leads to a proclamation about living water followed by the conversion of many in the woman's town of scar through her testimony. A Samaritan woman thus becomes the first evangelist in john's gospel (John 4:4-26; 39-42).

But the most significant story is of a gentile woman, a Phoenician from Syria. (Mark 7:24-30). In answer to her request for her daughter to be healed, Jesus tells her “let the children be satisfied first; it is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” - Jews should get the message of salvation first. Her challenge is that the message should go wider. The food is partly wasted, it falls from the table and there are plenty of ‘dogs’ ready to receive it; healing is for all. Some see this as Jesus testing the woman and not really denying the chance of healing on race or religious grounds. For others it is the unique time when the human part of Jesus is challenged and he accepts that he is wrong. The one who achieves this is a gentile woman from another part of the world.

b. Qur’an

Christian scripture obviously does not mention Islam but the Qur’an is as ‘liberal’ and as accepting of others as Jesus in many respects. “We believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord ... we make no difference between one and another of them, and we bow to God (Qur’an 2, 136). Muslims therefore believe that all the listed prophets received the same revelation as there was only one to be given, but that some of this has been distorted – such as in Christianity. Some of other faiths would say that not all the mentioned faith leaders could be seen to be teaching the same thing, but each had an important role in getting people to understand more about what faith meant. Another important passage about the Jewish, Christian and Muslim followers – the ‘People of the Book’ – confirms, in addition, that followers of other faiths should be more than respected: “Those who follow the Jewish scriptures, and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in God and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord (Qur’an 2.62).

As other scriptures, the Qur’an is a product of a particular period of history [traditional Muslims would disagree] and the interfaith material relates to that time. In some instances, people of other faiths were seen as good or bad according to their behaviour, rather than their actual beliefs – much as Jesus himself dealt with non-Jews. In the Qur’an, Jewish rabbis and Christian monks are identified in this way: “Lo, many of the (Jewish) rabbis and the (Christian) monks devour the wealth of mankind and debar (men) from the way of Allah. They who hoard up gold and silver and spend it not in the way of Allah, unto them give tidings (O Muhammad) of a painful doom” (5.82). That is simply a prediction of what will happen to the rich, who are castigated by Jesus in much the same way.

In other places Christians and Jews are seen to be in competition – as perhaps all three faiths really were - and almost made fun of “And the Jews say the Christians follow nothing true, and the Christians say the Jews follow nothing true; yet both are readers of the (same) Scripture”. The answer is that there will be final judgement, not present action “Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that wherein they differ” (2.13). Some more negative sections suggest Muslims should not be friends with Jews or Christians (though here, differently from the previous quote, Jews and Christians appear to be friends: “O you who believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other; and whoever amongst you takes them for a friend, then surely he is one of them; surely Allah does not guide the unjust people”. Again the

members of the two other faiths are seen as morally not perfect and the fear is that this will spread - there is no command to act against them. There are many other sections of the Qur'an in which followers are urged to proclaim that only Allah is right, but nothing contradicts that initial quotation that Jews, and Christians are among those who believe in Allah and the last day and will all have the same reward "on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (2.62).

While it is true that members of other faiths living today in Islamic societies sometimes have to obey strict interpretations of Islamic belief (women not allowed to drive, alcohol forbidden, etc.), Islam itself cannot be forced on anyone. Forced believers would not be accepted by God. "There is no compulsion in religion; truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error; therefore, whoever rejects Satan (and what he calls to) and believes in Allah, he indeed has laid hold on the firmest handhold" (2.256). All this is there to see, though there are sections which appear to diminish women's rights in particular – and much more so than the antiquated Christian view of the man as "head of the household". There are issues over which many involved in human rights issues have strong criticisms, including homosexuality, on which most Muslims agree with their sharpest critics within the Christian faith.

But all arguments using scriptural texts are selective and I could certainly be accused of picking the most welcoming texts. I admit that, much as I do when selecting biblical texts. In addition, within some present day Muslim communities any action or words spoken against them are seen as hostile and can cause violent reactions. The words of the Qur'an quoted above may in theory be accepted, but members of those other faiths are perceived by many Muslims as not keeping to their own guidelines. The same words may be ignored either because opponents are seen as outside any faith commitment, or because their behaviour is seen to be against a traditional interpretation of the Qur'an and the honour given to Mohammad.

An example of this was heard again on the Radio 4 Sunday programme, exactly a week after the Rowan Williams controversy, when the Dutch cartoonist Kurt Vestigor was interviewed in his protected home. His cartoon of Mohammed wearing a bomb as a turban had been published again because those threatening him had been arrested. He justified this in terms of the need for freedom of expression in a country whose laws are tolerant of all faiths – and again there were demonstrations and death threats. A spokesman for the newspaper argued that the news agenda should not be set by the intolerant and their threats. In response, the head of Muslim Council of Britain's Interfaith Relations Committee, Ibrahim Mogra, said that right of the freedom of expression should take into consideration and "not trample on the feelings and sensitivities of others", but also that these violent reactions were wrong: "Islam does not give us the right to take the law into their own hands and threaten, intimidate or even murder individuals who do anything wrong as Islam would declare it to be wrong." He added that those plotting against the cartoonist should be brought to justice.

That moderate view may be there among the majority of educated western-based Muslims but as in Christianity, there is a wide variety of views, including liberal. On the same day that the Guardian newspaper reported the abuse of children by Christians in Nigeria noted above it told of Moez Masoud, is one of a growing group of new presenters

of Islam using satellite TV to advocate a modernisation "... in a stylish goatee and western clothes, Masoud, 29, was preaching about Islam in youthful Arabic slang. He said imams who outlawed art and music were misrepresenting their faith. He talked about love and relationships, the need to be compassionate toward homosexuals and tolerant of non-Muslims."(4) The article concludes: "He advocates prayer five times a day, peace toward all and abstinence from alcohol, sex outside marriage and violence. Beyond this, he says, Islam is suffering from a crisis of interpretation. 'I'm sure Osama bin Laden knows a lot of the Qur'an,' he says, 'But when a Muslim celebrates when the Twin Towers collapse, you have a big problem.'"

This is not just a 21st Century phenomenon. On holiday in France I came across a chapel dedicated to seven saints. These had apparently become imprisoned and abandoned by Emperor Decius in the C3rd but had miraculously survived 200 years to their time of release. Their story is told slightly differently in chapter 18 of the Qur'an (300 years, maybe fewer men) but in the C19th a Turkish businessman in the area began to advocate a joint recognition of them. Still today there are joint annual celebrations at the chapel.

All this recognises and puts into context the wider truths about all faiths – that there are many different interpretations of written texts that each is linked to culture and history, and they influence and are influenced by events. In scriptures there are elements of recognition of other faiths, but many ignore these if they feel their own values are being challenged, or use words out of context to back up views arrived at from other experience.

Terrorism

The issue which most westerners are concerned about, and certainly on which our media concentrates is terrorism. Terrorism is not unique to the minority within Islam. Japanese Second World War suicide bombers were inspired by both Shintoism and Buddhism and both Christians and Hindus have been involved in Sri Lanka. Action by that Islamic minority has been justified by taking verses out of context from the Qur'an, forgetting the violent situation in which it was written, when some adherents of other faiths were themselves in violent opposition to the growth of the Muslim faith. The vast majority of Muslim scholars and leaders refute their interpretation and condemn their actions as politically motivated.

The word perhaps most mis-used in this context is jihad. The Arabic root for this is jahada which means to strive for a better way of life. Related words are translated as endeavour, exertion, effort, strain, diligence and fighting to defend life, land and religion. It is the last of these which has had obviously different interpretations. The most used verses are in chapter nine of the Qur'an: "Fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them" (9.5) and "Fight those who believe not in God nor the last day, nor hold that forbidden which has been forbidden by God and his apostle, nor acknowledge the religion of truth even if they are people of the book, until they pay the jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (9.29). ("Jizya" is a tax on non-Muslims living in Muslim countries). It's immediately obvious that there are few absolutes even in these short quotes. Were all those in the twin towers "pagan"? Certainly not. Christians are not "pagan" in Muslim eyes and there were Muslims working there too. And if people pay

the jizya that excludes those members of other faiths from action against them if living in Muslim countries. Today, the jizva is seen as something more nominal – it is the willingness to accept and live within the local culture which is more important. Christians in Pakistan might complain that is being too positive.

The sections quoted above can only be seen to support violence if taken out of context. The chapter in general is about those who have broken agreements or treaties. It also speaks of the need for dialogue and time to be given to negotiation. War is forbidden when agreements remain in place, and those outside the faith who are regular in prayer and exercise charity should be accepted. There are other phrases such as 9.13 that are also guides to its interpretation, as any action can only be against those who “have violated their oaths, plotted to expel the apostle, and were aggressors by being the first to assault you”.

While the words are sometimes taken to justify violence, they clearly go against other teaching. Life is not to be taken unless there is a just cause. “Nor take life - which Allah has made sacred - except for just cause. And if anyone is slain wrongfully, we have given his heir authority (to demand qisas or to forgive): but let him not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life; for he is helped (by the Law)” (17.33) This comes in the middle of a section on moral behaviour, and is seen by most scholars to mean that the innocent should not be killed.

Keith Ward gave a Gresham College lecture on “Holy War – Religion and Violence” which I have used in part above to identify verses and find helpful reactions. He summarises his section on the jihad by saying:

The general teaching of the Qur’an is that if people are not convinced by the superiority of Islam, then the issue must be left to God, not decided by force of arms. Indeed, to impose Islam by force might be seen as self-defeating, since true Islam is submission to the heart of God, and that cannot be compelled. The traditional Islamic view is therefore that, while forces that make Islamic practice impossible or that are actively hostile to Islam must be opposed- and that is part of jihad – Muslims should live in peace with others who are not hostile(5).

I also found the University of South Carolina’s website to be a useful place for research, having three translations of the Qur’an into English and dealing with a number of ‘misconception’ areas. On terrorism, it says:

It should be clear, then, that "Muslim terrorist" is almost an oxymoron: by killing innocent people, a Muslim is committing an awesome sin, and Allah is Justice personified. This phrase is offensive and demeaning of Islam, and it should be avoided. It is hoped that as the general level of public awareness and understanding of Islam increases, people will keep "terrorism" and "Islam" separate from each other, not to be used in the same phrase.(6)

If words are kept in context and taken together, there is little difference between the Christian and Islamic views of ‘just war’. The Qur’an allows defence of attacks on its faith, and retaliation, but following verses always impose conditions. 2.193 requires

fighting in response to attack until both justice and faith in God prevail. Taken out of context, parts of the Qur'an are sometimes used wrongly, but the reasons for terrorism are much deeper and wider, and Qur'an is wrongly used to back these up.

Christian views of the Qur'an

So how should Christians regard the Qur'an? The 'jihad' is assumed to be a cause of war and violence, but just as we see Jesus' words within the wider context of his principles and values, we should do the same for Islam and the Qur'an. Just as we excuse the violence, tribalism, denigration of women, slavery, pettiness of regulations and miracle myths of the OT as relating to an earlier understanding of the divine, so we should treat the Qur'an in the same way. It was written later, but related to its time and current thinking. Even conservative Christians will often accept that the Old Testament [though not always the New] is not now relevant because it deals with a very different culture. Many rabbinical scholars believe that Jews should rigorously question their scripture, but seeing words of the Qur'an also as adaptable because they originated at a time of different knowledge of the world is still difficult for many Muslims.

Satisfying conservative groups within both faiths is almost impossible, as each sees themselves as being on the true path. Each will justify their position by quoting their own scripture and digging into the other to find words to challenge apparent opposites to their own. As always, this is a selective process. My own above selection of Jesus' view of other faiths and his values has shown how we should recognise their value and learn from others. I've tried to do the same from the Qur'an. But for both it is important to understand a little of the circumstances in which the Qur'an was written. While Christianity grew slowly, with a variety of authors in its scriptures and only had to cope with major international issues when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Islam had to deal with difficult political and military issues from the beginning. Muhammad faced violence for his reform movement and became both a military and new community leader. Scholars have detected differences between the words that came to Muhammad in Mecca and Medina. Just as many Christians see the Holy Spirit as guiding the hands of New Testament writers, so Muslims see Muhammad as the conveyor of God's Words.

Related to this again is the issue of how much 'scripture' can be brought up to date. Sikhs have an interesting view on this right from their beginning. Their founder, Guru Nanak, saw how difficult change would be in a culture deeply influenced by the caste system. He began a system of succession, with future gurus showing how their faith could be applied to particular circumstances. Three gurus died as a result. The tenth and last, Guru Gobind Singh, instructed them to follow the scriptures, focussing on the instructions for responsible living. It was now mature enough for followers to heed Guru Nanak's principles of religious tolerance, gender equality and social justice, applied to changing circumstances. This is more difficult in Islam than in Christianity. Christians can argue that the Holy Spirit didn't stop work with the New Testament writers, but Islam is much more focussed on the words transcribed by their founder, and even translations are not generally accepted as the true Word. This reinforces the views of those who for whatever other reason to do with history, personal situations, received discrimination or a feeling of helplessness in the current world set-up, feel that the Qur'an supports their violence. It

is clear that specific interpretations give the back-up for the reaction to the Danish cartoons as well as the terrorist violence. Moderate Muslims will use the Qur'an to counter extremism just as Christians will use the Bible but, to my mind, the only way such views will change in any faith and the advocates listen to moderates (or even liberals) is by dealing with the causes rather than arguing from the book.

Positive Views

Richard Holloway is one of people I have taken note of before. He ended another Gresham College lecture in April 2000 with this:

“I have tried to be positive ... of the great religious systems of east and west. It would have been just as easy to be negative, to point to their excesses. I could have underlined the way the religions of the east inculcate a kind of fatalism that allows obvious social evils to go unchallenged, and I could have pointed to the pathologies that often characterise Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, all with a tendency to the unlovely excesses of fundamentalism. Lionel Blue pointed out perceptively that these three religions all have different ways of going mad, or produce different types of neurotic personalities. Judaism tends to produce obsessive-compulsives, Christianity sadomasochists and Islam megalomaniacs. We could use that insight as an instrument for probing the shadow side of each faith system. On the other hand, we could emphasise the contribution each tradition has made to the good of humanity. From the perspective of critical realism, we could say that each in its own way, from the very different and historical circumstances, has responded to the mystery of the possibility of transcendence that seems to haunt mankind. Our wisest response to the fact of different faith systems should be what the Bishop of New Westminster in Canada calls ‘grounded openness’; we can be grounded in our own tradition, with no desire to leave it, while remaining open to other traditions and the costly commitment they evoke from their followers. There is a generosity about that approach which seems entirely appropriate to people who live, as we all now do, in multicultural societies” (7).

The same week as the Archbishop of Canterbury's lecture the real cost of the Iraq war was revealed in the USA. In addition to the then 4000 soldiers killed and 70,000 wounded, the effect on relationships with many countries, and the cost to Iraq in its weak government, massive migration and internal slaughter between Sunni and Shia, there is also the financial cost. Now believed to be three trillion dollars (very different from Donald Rumsfeld's suggestion of 50 - 60 million dollars), had that money been spent on aid, cultural exchanges and economic development in the Middle East beyond Israel (the USA's largest receiver of 'aid') then the story might have been very different. There would have been little impetus for terror, less support for those wrongly using the term jihad, and our dealings with Islam might concentrate on the kind of issue the Archbishop of Canterbury was raising – how we accept other faiths and how each has to live with not only other faith groups but also the wider cultural and community expectations which all faith groups can find equally challenging.

We (Western Christians) need to understand that the source of terrorism is a misreading of the Qur'an in a particular historical context in which, despite some oil wealth, many Muslims feel that the end of their former Empire and its power have led to exploitation.

The background is therefore in resentment about power and its misuse. Though this is difficult to conceive of in the Muslim world, to my mind an important first step has to be an understanding that words relate to a particular piece of history. As in Christianity this could hopefully be done without removing any Principles but seeing rules within a particular context. This need to relate to modern reality has to be an important step and can be done without denying the origin or value of those words. This was reinforced by Dr Mona Siddiqui in her 'Thought for the Day' on 3rd April 2008, at a time when the cartoon issue had come into the wider world again. She quoted Ben Elton saying: "There is no doubt about it, the BBC will let vicar gags pass but they won't let imam gags pass." She went on to say "In a world where everything is up for critique, nothing remains sacred any more, why should faith - and, for that matter, one faith - be exempt from global commentary? In a world where freedom of expression is paraded as the ultimate triumph of robust democracies, faith is only one aspect of society with all its weaknesses and strengths; it must remain open to both protection and objection. You also need freedom of speech not just for people you agree with". She concluded: "For me, religion is not weakened but strengthened by humour. The ability to see the bad with the good, the problems as well as the gifts of faith demands that we be honest and reflective, able to engage with a wide array of cultural and social perspectives. The ability to see ourselves as others might see us is a sign of humility. The ability to laugh at ourselves is a sign of confidence and maturity, that we take neither ourselves nor what we believe to be the only moral arbiters of society. Laughter not only connects us to each other but lifts the soul - as E.E. Cummings said, the most wasted of all days is one without laughter".[8]

Would not the shared humour of people who respect each other's ideals and live as friends be a good place to start?

Mutual Respect

Another 'Thought for the Day' reinforced for me the idea that mutual respect rather than unique claims would help our world be fairer and less worrying.

Beginning with the role Christianity has played in Britain, Indarjit Singh went on to talk of the arrival sixty years ago of the Empire Windrush with the first organised and invited group of immigrants. Others of many faiths and cultures then followed, and as he pointed out: "The challenge, then and now, was how to find a new equilibrium of trust and respect to prevent ignorance, suspicion and prejudice harming community cohesion". [9] He then recalled a similar situation in India some four hundred years ago:

"Before Muslim incursions and settlement, most people in India also shared a generally common history with a bit of a superior attitude to the rest of the world. The conquering Muslims were considered barbarians and the Muslim invaders were equally dismissive of the majority Hindu population. It was against this background that the Sikh Gurus taught the importance of respect between different religions and cultures. Guru Arjan asked a Muslim saint Mia Mir to lay the foundation stone of the Golden Temple to show his respect for the followers of Islam. He also added verses of Hindu and Muslim saints in the Sikh Holy scriptures the Guru Granth Sahib, where these were in line with Sikh teachings, to show no one faith has a monopoly of truth. In his own compositions he wrote of the importance of recognising the same one God of us all, who is both, Allah

and Ram, and God and Jehovah; the Creator of all that exists. He also emphasised the Sikh teaching of the equality of all human beings”.

I agree with his conclusion: “Today, respect for beliefs of others, and recognition that we are all members of one human family, remain twin pillars for harmony in our increasingly diverse society”, though I would like to add a third pillar – trying to understand the core ‘Principles’ of other faiths.

References

1. Tracy McVeigh, Child Abuse in the name of God, The Guardian Weekly, 21/12/2007, pp.38f.
2. Details in: James Massey, Dalits in India, ISPCK, 1995 and David Haslam, Caste Out, CTBI, 1999.
3. Kevin P Spicer, Hitler’s Priests, Northern Illinois University Press, USA.
4. Kevin Sullivan, ‘Islam lite’ or faith of the future? The Guardian Weekly, 21/12/2007, p.40.
5. Keith Ward, Holy War- Religion and Violence, Gresham College, 2/11/2007, downloadable from www.gresham.ac.uk
6. University of South Carolina, web site: www.usc.edu/dept/quran
7. Richard Holloway, Living with other faiths, Gresham College lecture, April 2000, p.11f.
8. Dr Mona Siddiqui, Thought for the Day, BBC Radio4, 03/04/2008.
9. Indarjit Singh, Thought for the Day, BBC Radio 4, 24/06/2008.

Chapter 2: Community

Personal memories

I grew up in Southampton immediately after the Second World War. No-one in our street had a car - the only one that ever came was the doctor’s - and we played cricket on the road (six and out if the ball went into a neighbour’s garden). There was plenty of unused land around, some cleared following enemy action, other places just not developed in the way that they would be now. One favourite area for games as well as catching tadpoles and newts and sticklebacks was a marshy area full of ponds created by bomb craters – the result of targeting a nearby spitfire factory. We walked there, played all day and returned safely home. Horses were left to feed there; scout groups used it for day and night games.

Now it has been filled in, ‘made safe’, and is a boring park. But in the real sense of being safe, things have changed. Children do not go there on their own. Streets have more traffic, but that’s not the reason. We are obsessed with health and safety. Parents as well as organised groups would feel unsafe to let five year olds go there without direct and close supervision. We are frightened of abusers, accidents, and being sued for lack of responsibility. Liability and fear have taken the fun out of childhood; children don’t play in the way that I did. Adults wouldn’t dare touch a child who had fallen over (as I often did). Something about being together and also reacting to each other has gone.

For ten years from 1997 I was lucky to live in one of five flats in a 'shared house'. There were no separate utility charges according to usage, we helped the planet with just one shared washing machine and we worked on the house and garden together. Anyone buying a flat had to agree to share both costs and work and be approved by the other house occupants. The scheme had started in the 1970's but, by the time we came to sell, estate agents and solicitors hated it. Likewise, most potential buyers were put off by the shared values and asked questions about what happened to make sure that people who used four lights paid more than someone using two, and didn't like our answer.

The wider world and Isaiah's vision

My memories represent some of the changes we have become used to - changes in 'community'. In the wider world there are very different examples. These are nations, tribes and religious groups.

2008 was little different from previous years, beginning with the dispute over election results in Kenya leading to communities dividing along tribal and party lines – which in part, with minorities often becoming refugees within their own country. Protesters were shot, and even the well-educated minority was seemingly split along the same lines. This was just one example of what happened and is still happening in many parts of the world. On the last Sunday in January Radio 4's morning service commemorated the Holocaust and also reminded us of the ethnic and religious community brutalities that have occurred since. In a piece read by a woman from Rwanda, herself a victim of such a conflict, we were reminded of places from Uganda to Bosnia and present day Darfur. Disputes in Tibet and parts of eastern China came to our attention close to the Beijing Olympics, and Russia created huge international tension through using the divided communities in Georgia as an excuse to occupy part of the country. Towards the end of the year attention moved again to Africa and the abuse of rural communities by bandits, rebel groups and government troops alike, in both the eastern Congo and the Central African Republic.

2009 and 2010 were much the same: Pakistan and Iraq suffered enormous casualties from radical Islamist suicide bombers unhappy with government; this country's public and media counted the number of British troops killed in Afghanistan, in part due to internal divisions; Somalia and the Yemen continued also with their internal divisions, and weak governments – one resulting in piracy, the other in terrorism. Zimbabwe continued to be divided on party lines despite the similar agreement to that in Kenya and, similarly, is fundamentally tribal-based. Probably the most divisive on faith grounds was the over-reactive Israeli response to Hamas in Gaza and the continued building of settlements in Palestine, with electricity and water often unavailable to non-Jews, whose land had been stolen.

The inability to deal with climate change showed that many political leaders did not see the world as one community.

The United Kingdom is not absent from the community problems list. One theory is that in developed countries failure in areas as diverse as child crime, family breakup, percentage of adults in prison are all part of the problems in the developed economies which are the most unequal. Only the USA and Portugal are worse than the UK. At the

other end are Sweden and Japan. The debate around bankers' bonuses in both the USA and UK surely is related to this? (This is explored later in some detail.)

It all makes me think of that wonderful piece in Isaiah on the 'Peaceful Kingdom' (Isaiah 11:1-9) which images for us a community in which previous hostilities disappear. From those verses the part that enlivens our imagination is the idea of cows and bears eating together, lions eating straw with oxen, and babies playing with poisonous snakes. For the rural-living people of Isaiah's time this is a wonderful illustration of the preceding verses about the behaviour of leaders and the principles under which rulers should operate so that societies would flourish.

Our own community is nowhere near that vision and is divided in so many ways, including the hostility by many towards Muslim groups and immigrants. There are many examples of an underlying lack of respect for each other. At the root is lack of knowledge, obvious in the two places I have most recently lived in. In the rural community hardly anyone has knowledge of or contact with ethnic minorities or other faiths. Their opinions about both are often very open. Their assumption is usually that we had left inner-city London because of that or because of crime and violence. In Peckham there was surprise that in a small town and nearby villages we have supermarkets, a cinema showing the latest films, the current holder of the "best fish shop in the UK" award, and healthcare easily matching that in cities. There is also the myth that you have to be around for thirty years before you are viewed as a resident and your neighbour will speak to you.

The animal imagery in Isaiah might be hard to follow for many children today, particularly in urban areas. Milk apparently comes from tankers and not from cows, bread is from a shelf and not from flour or wheat, and the thought that the Christmas turkey was once probably a live imprisoned bird has not even occurred to them. That separation from the agricultural world is just one small sign of the increased compartmentalising which we seem to be in.

Despite much more travel and availability of information we seem to know little about each other and in some cases to have little thought for each other. Our worlds have become much more private, and the balance of personal rights and feeling for community seems to have changed. Even as tourists, so many people are cocooned in a replica of their home culture and make few links with host communities – we travel in what have been called 'mobile ghettos'.

The compartmentalising of our world and separation of personal from community is obvious at every level. Why is it we now see signs on our own trains and buses telling us we should give up seats for the elderly – something previously assumed to be normal – and at the same time parents claim the right of a seat for their child rather than using their laps and allowing others to sit? Just a complaint from an aging grumpy ex-commuter? Maybe, but in an article in The Guardian on 28/01/08 Madeleine Bunting narrated a slightly different transport experience of children being shoved and pushed out of the way when trying to get on commuter buses. "Being pushed, sworn at and squeezed" was something her 12 year old daughter was familiar with – she smiled at her mother's naivety. That illustration comes from an article, entitled "From buses to blogs, a pathological individualism is poisoning public life". She wrote of how aggression erupts,

how blogging is now used to express aggressive personal themes without regard for others (and this is seen as therapy by some). What is being lost is the ability to listen and the option to agree to differ. An added danger is that in response we “withdraw into bunkers of the like-minded, vacating the territory of solidarity and common purpose”.

These commuter stories may seem just tiny examples of the lack of care for each other and the way we fail to take seriously Isaiah’s wonderful vision of community. But there are serious things happening in our community in the UK which show the same personal preferences and lack of ability to accept difference. The obvious example is urban youth violence.

Urban violence

I recently lived for ten years in Peckham. Twenty years ago it was known for its flat-dwelling under-achieving but strangely lovable Del Boy of Only Fools and Horses - and that TV image of a white working-class, petty criminal world was what the rest of the UK knew of Peckham. Then things changed. While I never experienced violence – nor did my wife, who lived there for twenty years – it is now known for violence, particularly amongst black young men.

First there was Damilola Taylor, the boy murdered on the staircase of some since pulled-down Peckham flats. That case is still not resolved. That went out of the news but then a woman was shot holding a baby at a Christening Party. While the story that emerged was both terrifying and sad, we all hoped this was again an isolated incident, and that the world would not re-make its image of a violent corner of London. Then in one week in 2007 a fifteen year old boy was shot in his bed, three days earlier less than a mile away a man was shot dead and another seriously injured. The day before a man was stabbed to death. Similar incidents in London estates hit the news through 2007 and 2008 - so many that they hardly made national headlines any more. A Police report in August 2008 spoke of a youth street murder in London roughly every two weeks. The Police also said that knife crime was actually down compared to previous years, but the media continued to concentrate on this part of community life.

One newspaper said “Peckham has tried to improve its image since the killing of the ten-year old schoolboy Damilola Taylor, who bled to death after being stabbed with a broken bottle in 2000. That crime came to symbolise the extent of violence that was blighting certain parts of inner-city Britain”. Violent crime has in fact decreased, but seems to be concentrated in poor areas – the places once known for their neighbourliness.

The new poor?

Before the events of that terrible week I had a sermon planned for the following Sunday based on the Gospel reading “Blessed are the poor” (Luke 6:20). I was going to have my usual go at the rich, and attack the churches and individual Christians who seem to think the opposite - that wealth is God’s reward. But then I listened to a social worker interviewed on the radio. He said that the problem was the lack of relationships - a new kind of poverty. It came to me that the Gospel was saying something to us for our present time.

The day after the killing a radio report about posh new housing estates spoke of no space for community, assuming that everyone would get out of their houses and move around by car and have no relationships with any neighbour. It seems we are encouraging the poverty of relationships at all levels - while poverty in terms of income and resources are an important factor, the new poverty is far wider.

It reminded me of something said to me by a teacher in another urban area: "The only place where children now speak to an adult is in school - and I have 30 of them. At home they either all watch TV together and don't talk or go their separate ways to watch their own in their bedrooms, or play games on computers or spend the evening texting or on-line. They don't do things together as a family. They don't eat together, they don't talk, they don't play, and when younger they don't have bed-time stories. They don't know how to relate. No-one teaches right and wrong. In one sense families don't exist". Was she going a bit over the top?

The socially poor

George M Soares-Prabhu teaches theology in India, and has written on biblical uses of the word 'poor'(1). Using the language expertise needed for this kind of analysis, he shows how the Old Testament has a much wider understanding of the poor than does the New (p.154). The various words in the Old Testament translated as 'poor' words can mean materially needy, socially oppressed or spiritually lowly, whereas the New Testament has a more uniform use of the word *ptōchos* whose origin is 'to crouch' or 'cringe', describing someone who survives in their destitution by begging. In only three uses of the word (including Luke 6:20 about which I had planned to preach) are the poor seen to be privileged in some way. Are those who will be specially blessed going to receive this because they are spiritually poor (as Soares-Prabhu suggests most traditional Western theologians would claim), or are they rewarded because they are socially poor? "This tendency to spiritualise the poor of the Beatitudes which cuts across all denominational differences and brings together exegetes who would otherwise agree on scarcely anything else, is a good indication of the extent to which exegetical trends are in fact determined by the spirit of the times" (p.155). He then suggests that modern theologians, perhaps influenced by socialism, are more likely to see things differently. (Interestingly, he does not explore whether third world theologians were influenced in the same way). Those Jesus spoke to and about were destitute because of prevailing social conditions, including exploitation by religious leaders. He also supported the illiterate, the socially outcast, the physically disabled, and the mentally ill. All these are victims and reduced to "a condition of diminished capacity or worth" (p.156). Soares-Prabhu concludes that therefore the poor are a sociological group.

Soares-Prabhu adds that in both Old and New Testaments the poor are also a dynamic group who are bearers of salvation and hope. In what some might see as a classic socialist parallel, Jesus gives up the security of home supported by a locally needed artisan skill. First followers are other artisans (fishermen) an 'untouchable' tax collector and an outlawed zealot, probably from a guerrilla group. Zaccheus is possibly the only 'rich' person to give support. Many tax collectors were forced into that despised position because there was no other choice. They were often slaves. Unlike Sadducees, most

Pharisees were also lower class, influential because of their piety. Soares-Prabhu then points out (pp.164-5) that the three wealthy followers are not portrayed well: the rich landowner will not sell up to follow Jesus (Mark. 10:17-22); Nicodemus does not want to lose his reputation so only visits at night (John 3:1); and Joseph of Arimathaea (a 'seeker' and not a follower) only helps out at the burial (Mark. 15:43). He finishes this section of his paper with some significant summaries about the new humanity which the Bible presents. It is communitarian rather than individual, with its image of a New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-4 – so often used at funerals) "prefigured and prepared for by the contrast communities that we keep on struggling to build in time" (p.166).

He continues: "The new humanity and the communities through which it takes shape grow through conflict". He then gives examples: God/Satan, liberation/bondage, etc., - an ethical dualism which finds expression in the conflict of poor/wicked or poor/rich. The conflict is resolved "by an act of God in favour of the poor". He ends by saying "Salvation comes from God, but it is actualised in and through the struggles of the poor" (p.166).

This could be taken further, as it is by Soares-Prabhu, and here it may feel like a lengthy diversion to this 'community' theme, but what if he is right that the new humanity (admittedly in his description, in heaven) and the communities through which it takes shape grow through conflict? His answer was that God resolved this by an act in favour of the poor – which has to be the coming of Jesus.

'Blessed are the poor'

So how do those words of Jesus - "Blessed are the poor" - apply to those weaknesses in community we have all witnessed and Peckham has felt as much as anywhere else? Just as many of the victims and perpetrators of violence, our congregation were mostly people whose overseas family origins were in physically poorer but active communities. Now often still relatively poor in the UK, how and why had the community sense gone? What could I say to them from that Sunday's gospel?

Jesus knew the poor. He knew they lived in households, they helped each other, and they were units, not collections of individuals thinking only of themselves. He knew they needed each other, and that poor households rely on relationships to survive. Relationships are more important than money because when anything goes wrong there are others to help out. So maybe our problem is that we've lost all that, and with it the trust, the affection, the ability to sort out problems within communities and families. Our rules of life are learned in the home, but in the 'civilised' West we are now into the second generation at least of people whose lives are dominated by that screen in the corner or on the wall, if not in every bedroom. So we have parents who themselves did not experience much in the way of relationships - which in simple terms means spending time with each other. Now there is even more opportunity to have private time - we don't know how to be in families and communities.

In many poorer countries we see the same breakdown, though at a different level and with different elements. Power, status and potential wealth are all at stake and relationships brake down among the poor through exploitation of ethnic interests by

political leaders, who are unwilling to meet because their own positions are more important to them than the livelihoods of their supporters.

In Peckham or Kenya or whichever situation, individualism has become predominant, a right, a secular version of 'selfish salvation'. We see that through the growing gap between the powerful wealthy and the poor in our own society, and also the growth of 'celebrity status' which has little to do with moral values. In some of our urban estates this is seen in the gang status. An 'ASBO' gives status. Power and status of the group bring together the wants of individuals in a way they believe they can be met. When this is challenged by an individual or another group, violence seems to be the all too common resolution.

I believe this is something that many of our teachers and social workers and, where they exist, youth workers too would say. But Jesus somehow had it right long ago. He knew that the really poor, who need and often have those trusting relationships, are truly blessed because they reflect the vision God has for his people - they have each other, often rely on each other, and at the same time they have in their lives a picture of what real wealth is too. Real wealth is relationships, friends, supporters, affection, sharing of ideas and feelings and exchange of things that are needed by individuals. Soares-Prabhu spoke of communities growing through conflict and, in situations like Kenya or Peckham, that can happen because all begin to see the need for common aims. This is the way in which the poor are truly blessed, which in reality means to be chosen, to be favoured by God in some way.

That might almost seem to be an excuse for the powerful decision-makers to avoid doing anything about physical poverty. "Let them do it - God has blessed them so they are better off than us" - and sometimes both government/local authority and church solutions may not work. But if we go back to those words of Isaiah, we have the vision of a ruler with wisdom as well as the knowledge and skill to lead. Neither appearance nor hearsay will influence judgement because the poor will be judged fairly and their rights defended. All will be ruled with justice and integrity. Above all, anyone making the rules for how our society should be will not only understand the ethical demands of the God they serve, but "will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth" (Isaiah 11:3f). Sadly it goes on to talk of destroying the sinful but, that apart, examples of the kind of people who followed that vision and of whom we need more today include Tutu and Winter, quoted earlier in "Back to the Beginning" The predominant concern for them is for community which has to include all. I'm sure they also find or found it difficult to relate Jesus' words to our present age. He lived a long time ago, in a different culture, practised a different religion, and spoke a language so different that sometimes we miss what he's on about.

In the church we sometimes take single sentences or even single words out of their relationship with each other, for example, what Jesus says about the poor in his time. We often see Jesus' words as being about ourselves and not about those around us. Christians are often guilty of not caring about relationships and instead wanting things from God - blessings, miracles, prosperity, gifts of some kind. The message we give is too often: "Join our church and your life will get better - not just spiritually, but materially too. God will 'bless you' and that means 'reward you'". As I recalled in 'Selfish Salvation', they

quote the Bible: “Ask and you will receive.” - ignoring as people always do when it suits them that every bit of the Bible is in a context - and the context for “ask and you will receive” is “seek and you will find” - if we’ve really sought, looked for and found God, then how can we ask for something for ourselves?

Perhaps there’s a clue to all this in the disciples - the first followers of Jesus. To recap from earlier on, the ones we know about were four fishermen, the untouchable tax collector who gave it all up and the zealot who was a member of an outlawed group - all people despised by others - the equivalents today might be migrant workers, someone hated as a debt collector and maybe a gang leader on one of our estates. But they made a relationship with Jesus, they followed, in one sense became a community – and they founded our church. True they let him down at times, especially at the cross. Would we not have run away too? But they did give up everything for him.

God isn’t telling us it’s better to be poor like them in a physical sense. He’s telling us that we must think carefully around how much anything we do is self-centred, whether in the way we treat the environment, the domination we enjoy as nations or races or genders, the wealth we accumulate, or above all our relationships with other people. These can all draw us away from God because our selfishness means we care more about ourselves and less about those around. And those around us are the fruit of God’s creation; they are the closest we get to God. Relating to neighbours and strangers is the way that we can show what we believe and how that forms our lives. So if “blessed are the poor”, and God’s blessing goes to them, and if we should be trying to imitate God and show that blessing, then one major area in which we must concentrate is our poverty of community. This includes the poor and deprived of Jesus’ time and ours - not because they are physically poor, but because God gives them what we fail to give them.

To return briefly to Soares-Prabhu, is the new community formed out of conflict? Are groups who choose to be together, including gangs of youths, the new reality? Do we accept that or is our hope for something much wider? Is that linked to the competition and greed undergirding our business and advertisement/fashion based society? Is it individuals, families, society’s values, governing bodies - or a complicated combination of all or some – which are responsible for high unemployment, drug-dealing, poor school results, unsuitable housing, and street violence? Most of us would see these in some sort of downward spiral, with the key factor in jumping off the spiral being the family.

If the poor are blessed because they have nothing and God will favour them and forgive them, if he will bless the victims we and our society have helped to create, how will that happen?

Back to the beginning

An important thinker for me is someone I met a couple of times in a theological college run on community lines in Costa Rica. Elsa Tamez always makes me think of a people poor in a different way but still blessed by God. In that very male-dominated culture of Central America with a majority church which never ordains women, she taught theology in a college which refused to take a male student unless there were an equal number of women there too. Equality is just one of the things that she fights for. But most important

to her as the Professor of Biblical Studies was how God speaks to the people who are around her - the poor.

For Elsa Tamez,(2) we have first to try to understand the difficult circumstances of the first century community in the same way that Jesus would. Somewhat echoing Soares-Prabhu, she writes: “The Good News takes a very concrete form. The central message is this: the situation cannot continue as it is; impoverishment and exploitation are not God’s will” (p.67). There are many who want to preserve their privileges or prefer not to see that following Jesus has wide social and political implications. They will say Jesus came to save us from sin – and identify that with the personal actions that society sees as wrong; drug taking, binge drinking, etc., which do lead to other wrongdoing. But because the reign of God is the reign of justice, we should not reduce the gospel of life to a simple behavioural change. For Tamez, that kind of moral teaching “amounts to nothing but a set of patches designed to cover over the great sin that lies underneath: oppression at the national and international, the individual and collective levels. The message of the Good News is the liberation of human beings from everything and everyone that keeps them enslaved” (p.68).

She then examines some of the great sections of Luke’s Gospel that were familiar to me years ago as a choirboy. She begins with Mary, who sang to her cousin Elizabeth:

*He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
He has put down the mighty from their thrones.
And exalted those of low degree;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent empty away. (Luke 1:52-53)*

Her song was at a time of celebration, and if we see that as really her views, Jesus certainly had the right mother – not meek and mild, but convinced about the need for justice in society.

Jesus’ first recorded sermon has that theme too, simply reading from Isaiah, saying one sentence and sitting down:

*He has sent me
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:19).
He added: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21)*

Leonardo Bosch, another Latin American theologian and often at odds with the Vatican, has reminded us that liberation does not yet mean liberty: “Today there are people who believe that simply because they know the church’s dogmas and the books of the Bible or because they receive communion, they have a share in the kingdom of God. But they are wrong. Jesus himself said “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

If we are followers of Jesus, excluding no-one, favouring the vulnerable and outcast by changing the way we act then we must favour those our society doesn’t, whose lives are

difficult, who cannot relate, who have been the worst victims of our present society. And we have many chances to do that already in every part of our world. Youth, children, the homeless, the materially poor, but also in our culture those who have retreated into an isolated TV/mobile/game-led culture and who are unable to relate - they are all waiting. We can then begin to bless the new poor, those who have lost the way to relate to each other as Jesus related to his followers.

We can of course, in the Peckham example or any other, find some local instance and blame specific policies or individuals. We do that to all sorts of people - government and local council for not doing enough, media tycoons for making so much profit in destroying people's lives. We can also, if we're not careful, make racist or nationalistic comments about those responsible for individual deaths. Some of the blame should indeed go to those people, but we are also responsible for changing things, and will not be specially blessed until we do so.

Church action

So what are we doing as a church? If we gave real support to teachers, social workers, local councillors and all who work so hard in our local communities, then we could ourselves begin to bless the new poor, those who have lost the way to relate to each other.

The Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, addressed a meeting of 'Youth for Christ' in September 2008.⁽³⁾ He praised the involvement of churches and Christians in community life - 22,000 Christian charities working in England and Wales, 540 of them involved in the Make Poverty History campaign and encouraging the Millennium Development goals. 23 million hours of voluntary work are given each year just by members of the Church of England. Commenting on the problems around external support (many trusts and other funders are suspicious of or barred from funding faith-based groups), he said "Of course there will be those who say the Church has no role to play in service delivery and that faith has no part to play in the solution. But the facts tell a different story." He then gave the figures quoted above, and continued "Far from fitting in to the stereotype of proselytising organisations which seek to bang each other over the head with their holy books, the report found that people of faith were involved not to score points or claim spiritual scalps, but simply to help those in need. The Church has a role to play because it is based in the community. It does not drive in to places of strife in the morning and leave before the lights go down. The Church remains as part of the community and where there is hurt, the Church shares that hurt, is part of it, and is hence uniquely placed to be part of the solution". (This theme is taken further in the chapter 'What Next?' which notes a 2008 Church of England report on its place in every community).

What gives me confidence is that I have already experienced this. At some level it is within each of our church communities. The wonderful mixed congregation in Peckham was certainly the biggest group of people I ever had a relationship with, and the completely different group in rural Rockwell Green in Somerset has been the most welcoming and sympathetic group. In both those places, however different they are, that community example needs to be shown to the outside world, and especially to the poor, those Jesus spoke of more than any other group in society - who in our time are not just the materially poor, though that group has even more to cope with. While, as John

Sentamu says, we should not aim at conversion, it would help us all to relate to each other by learning to follow Jesus' Principles, whatever we or they believe about him as a person, and even without mentioning him at all.

And less TV, a few more shared meals and a bit of talking together would help too!

On the wall next to my bed there is a brightly painted wooden cross from Guatemala. The figure of Jesus is marked with nail wounds, but calm and not in pain – seemingly in a post-resurrection new world. Above his head the sun shines brightly. His arms stretch out over trees, below which are cottages and farm animals. His feet are in a circle of land and water surrounded by a circle of more cottages. Beneath his feet is a golden heart. In its centre is a dove pointing downwards to the only other humans on this crucifix – a family. A vision of Jesus at the heart of a community?

References

1. George M Soares-Prabhu, Class in the Bible: the Biblical Poor a Social Class? in Voices from the Margin, ed. R.S.Sugithrarajah, SPCK, 1991.
2. Tamez, Elsa, Bible of the Oppressed, Orbis, 1982
3. John Sentamu, 11 September 2008, www.bishopthorpepalace.co.uk/1964

[Chapter 3: Homophobia](#)

I have to confess that there is anger behind this choice of subject on the individual life that Christians might be allowed. Like many, it has its origin in personal history.

In 1984 I was appointed as desk officer for Southern Africa by the Church of England mission agency, USPG. The work involved relating to the Anglican Church in Lesotho, Mozambique, Swaziland, South Africa and Namibia. This wasn't considered to be a complete job, so the Caribbean and Latin America were added. It was a risky appointment as back in 1971 I had been given 'Visa Exemption Removal' by South Africa – in effect a banning order. A visa was refused and I could only go to the first three countries, but not where the major part of the church was to be found. That part of the job went, and I had time to concentrate on Latin America. USPG then had just four missionaries based in Buenos Aires and one in Uruguay – both then the same diocese, supported because it included the variety of ideas and practice which are the hallmark of Anglicanism. It was very different from other parts of the Southern Cone Province, all of which had English bishops supported by another UK-based agency, the evangelical South American Missionary Society (SAMS).

One example of their different attitude then was when a USPG man was offered a job in an ecumenical group helping the poor with housing in Chile. Fearing loss of support from the SAMS-funding churches in the UK – all to do with the ecumenical project having Roman Catholic support - they could not acknowledge he was even in the country.

Next-door Brazil made me appreciate the importance of Anglicanism in that part of the world – it was not just another anti-Catholic evangelical church, but one which

encouraged people to be truly Anglican, with open debate, variety of views and that mixture of Eucharistic and biblical theologies which was home for people unhappy with the conservative certainties of both evangelical and RC churches. If it was going to be just another evangelical group it was not needed – enough of them existed already. I recruited the first USPG missionaries and volunteers for Brazil.

After I left USPG in 1996 sadly, things changed, with a SAMS-supported bishop in Buenos Aires, who later became Primate of the wider Province of the Southern Cone. The formerly liberal diocese had new priorities. As a conservative in the homosexuality debate he was encouraging people in Brazil (a separate Province) to give their allegiance to him – in effect undermining their work by taking authority in a created diocese outside his jurisdiction. I did not want to be part of the destruction of the only reason in my mind for the Anglican Church to exist in Latin America. In 2007 I therefore resigned after twenty two years as a trustee of the Argentine Diocesan Association (ADA). A small thing, but all I could do. The ADA was giving financial support to the social work of the church but also directly to the bishop. His role in trying to divide the church continues.

My anger is twofold. I believe the purpose of the Anglican Church, especially where it is in a minority, has to be to help people explore their faith and also recognize diversity. It is not right to discriminate. To see these both being ignored in a part of the world from which I learned so much was very hard – and the issue of homosexuality has become central to the future of Anglicanism and the right of people to live their own natural lives.

Anglicans and homosexuality

One side of the internal squabbles in the Anglican Church, initiated by the Archbishop of Nigeria but egged on by the Primate of the Southern Cone led to a Conference in Jerusalem (against the wishes of the local bishop) as an alternative to that held in Lambeth every ten years for all diocesan bishops from every province. One major aim of that conference is to learn from each other.

But the tradition of allowing each to develop systems and local rules according to local circumstances is failing because of views on homosexuality spoken of as ‘traditional’. The following news that the leaders of the church in Uganda would only go to Jerusalem and the ultra-conservative UK bishop of Rochester was afraid to cross his diocesan border to Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference was no surprise. The same bishop in July 2009 organised an English network of parishes opposed to homosexuality. At the same time the Episcopal Church in the USA abolished its voluntary three year embargo on appointing gay bishops and also same sex marriages, and in December that year the diocese of Los Angeles elected a gay woman who had a relationship of twenty years as Assistant Bishop. The Archbishop of Canterbury condemned the move as likely to create further division in the Anglican Church. (Strangely, he did not condemn the Pope when, a few weeks earlier, he had invited UK Anglicans opposed to women bishops to join the Roman Catholic Church). To many, the division of the Anglican Church seems inevitable

It raises in my mind one of the difficulties liberals always face, whether in faith or social concerns. Liberals always lose out because they accept difference and encourage debate. I would like to see myself within that group, though my castigation of the Southern Cone

Primate possibly negates any claim. Liberals encourage discussion, conservatives at either end will not take part, and the result is that their people rarely hear alternatives.

Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement

The chair of the UK Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM), Richard Kirker, retired in early 2008 after 30 years in post. An interview in the Spectator detailed both his personal exclusion from church ministry but also some of the complexities and priorities for other Christians. The LGCM also backed the ordination of women, which meant that many gay clergy from the catholic end of the church withdrew support. Liberal in only one respect! Richard was physically attacked by a Nigerian bishop who believed he could exorcise the evil of homosexuality.

The article showed how Richard felt other parts of church life have been affected (beyond the then ongoing debate about what would happen at that 2008 Anglican Lambeth Conference). The paragraphs quoted below struck me in particular as showing how in his mind the issue has become partly political and revealing some of the nastier and more bizarre stances of supposedly Christian homophobics.

“One mark of the ascendancy of the anti-gay wing of the Church is the present wave of resignations and dismissals at Wycliffe Hall, the theological college affiliated to Oxford University. This follows the arrival of a conservative principal who hit the headlines with his professed belief that 95 percent of the population will go to hell unless they follow the gospel. He also opposes the ordination of women, the irony of which is not lost on Kirker

*The principal of Wycliffe has been backed by James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool, who is the head trustee of the college and a vocal opponent of gay law reform. It may discomfort those who trumpet new Labour’s legacy of tolerance that Bishop Jones was given his diocese following the intervention of Tony Blair, but it does not surprise those who keep up with Church of England appointments. Another of Blair’s choice was Graham Dow, Bishop of Carlisle. It was Dow who blamed this year’s catastrophic floods in England on God’s wrath over gay marriage.”**

(* Bishop Dow later said this was a misinterpretation of his statement which related to the government’s lack of commitment to morality – he was focussing on climate change.)

As the government steadily moves religion to the centre of public life, through faith schools and other initiatives, Kirker finds he has more in common with secularists in his worries over this drift “Questions need to be asked about what of these faith projects are actually preaching, and there is an urgent need for research on the amount of public money being ploughed into homophobia”(1)

Traditional values, gay relationships

Most of the argument against full and equal acceptance of homosexual relationships within Christianity is based on biblical texts, and I will return to those in some detail. But tradition and culture are important too. Giles Fraser brought church tradition into the debate following the blessing of a civil partnership between two male Anglican clergy. His analysis was certainly thought-provoking for conservatives. He went back to the

1662 Book of Common Prayer, still seen as outlining doctrine and still used in worship today. The three stated reasons for marriage were ‘the procreation of children’, ‘remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication’ and for the ‘mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and diversity’. Giles asked rhetorically how these could apply to gay marriage.

“The third priority insists that marriage is designed to bring human beings into loving and supportive relationships. Surely no one can deny that homosexual men and women are in as much need of loving and supportive relationships as anybody else. And equally deserving of them too. This one seems pretty clear. The second priority relates to the encouragement of monogamy. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself has rightly recognised that celibacy is a vocation to which many gay people are simply not called. Which is why, it strikes me, the church ought to be offering gay people a basis for monogamous relationships that are permanent, faithful and stable. So that leaves the whole question of procreation. And clearly a gay couple cannot make babies biologically. But then neither can those who marry much later in life. Many couples, for a whole range of reasons, find they cannot conceive children - or, simply, don't choose to. Is marriage to be denied them? Of course not. For these reasons - and also after contraception became fully accepted in the Church of England - the modern marriage service shifted the emphasis away from procreation. The weight in today's wedding liturgy is on the creation of loving and stable relationships. For me, this is something in which gay Christians have a perfect right to participate. I know many people of good will are bound to disagree with me on this. But gay marriage isn't out culture wars or church politics; it's fundamentally about one person loving another. The fact that two gay men have proclaimed this love in the presence of God, before friends and family and in the context of prayerful reflection is something I believe the church should welcome. It's not as if there's so much real love in the world that we can afford to be dismissive of what little we do find. Which is why my view is we ought to celebrate real love however and wherever we find it”. (2)

Biblical differences

A. Old Testament

I will return to the arguments around culture and historical tradition but, while I believe that we should re-analyse other doctrines in the same way as Giles Fraser did for marriage, most conservatives on this as other issues need to be countered from where they themselves begin – the literal truth of the Bible. Most will base their argument in favour of discrimination against homosexuality comes from biblical texts. The negative texts do exist, though as the LGCM points out, not all are accurately translated. Most are taken from the Old Testament and we will deal with these first. Accepting that some texts do seem to prohibit homosexuality, how do we deal with them, and in particular how can we counter them? I will deal with the New Testament later. Any advocacy of a selected scriptural passage is in danger of being compared with others. Why should a particular verse be chosen and others ignored? If we see truth in all scripture, that has to include Deuteronomy 25:11-12. “When two men are fighting together, if the wife of one intervenes to protect her husband from the other’s blows by putting out her hand and

seizing the other by the private parts, you shall cut her hand off and show no pity". There are also parts of well-known texts which are difficult to accept: the second part of the famous psalm beginning "By the rivers of Babylon" (Psalm 137) ends "Babylon, you will be destroyed. Happy is the man who pays you back for what you have done for us – who takes your babies and smashes them against a rock." Why rejoice in and romanticise the first part and ignore the second? We do not accept all the harsh rules of the Old Testament about violence, racism, cruel punishment for offences, or killing of religious opponents. We cannot condone the ethnic cleansing of a God who in scripture orders the driving out and killing of original inhabitants to create the 'promised land' ("After the Lord your God has destroyed the people whose land he is giving you..." (Deuteronomy 19:1)). 'Traditional' acceptance of all scripture as God's will as well as his 'Word' seems impossible to justify. All this was underlined in a BBC4 'Thought for the Day' in July 2008. John Bell began with a story about a passage in the 'Song of Songs'. He then added:

"It's attributed to King Solomon, who certainly knew quite a bit about the subject (healthy erotic sex) having 700 wives and 300 concubines. Curiously he - though a direct ancestor of Jesus - is never taken as a model of good practice. Nor is Isaac: he's the son of Abraham, who is one of a number of biblical patriarchs with unusual dating practices. It's his father, who sends a servant to find a wife for the boy. Subsequently, the servant brings back home a girl called Rebecca to meet a man whom she has never seen, and who no sooner meets her than he takes her into his tent and beds her in consolation for the death of his mother.

I don't think I've been at a wedding ceremony yet where the vicar asks the groom: 'Do you come here earnestly seeking marriage to this woman because you are missing your mum?'"

Near the end he added: *"It's interesting how, on matters affecting human sexuality, Christians-feel free to pick and choose the bits that suit them. We elevate to the status of a litmus test of piety one aspect of sexuality about which the Bible is comparatively silent. (I'm sure you'll know the issue to which I'm alluding without me having to be explicit.) And yet more positive expressions we leave alone - like seeking my true love on my bed night after night".*

One text which used to be at the centre of the campaign against homosexuality, hence 'Sodomy', is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in which a crowd asks for 'men' to be sent out to them. The story is no longer used because of the rest – they are offered the host's daughters and the 'men' are judged by some to be non-human (sent by God) and the real focus of the story was hospitality.

B. New Testament

John Bell finished his short broadcast with the story of the Ethiopian eunuch: "... his is one of the first recorded baptisms in the New Testament. Even though as a eunuch he would have been spurned and victimised by some communities because of his "irregular sexuality", he was embraced and totally accepted by the fragile fledgling church".(3) To say that all scripture has to be given equal value is absurd, and some traditionalists would agree that while those Old Testament texts quoted above can be easily argued against, we cannot do the same with New Testament statements. In that understanding the Old

Testament has been superseded. We can only accept Old Testament passages which seem to be re-enforced by the New, and particularly of Jesus. For me such words would have to come within the Principles and rules concept, because Jesus says nothing on homosexuality at all. Paul's letters have two mentions, and the first (1 Corinthians. 6:9-10) is not clearly linked. It contains a list of evil behaviour in a letter addressed to a particular group of people – one man was known to meet with prostitutes and another was living with his mother-in-law. Paul was concerned that his new church would not grow if it was known to act immorally - though the words don't address these issues directly. There are many different translations and uses of particular words are highly debateable. The word sometimes translated as effeminate also means soft, as in the description of clothing when people went to meet John Baptist "Well what was it you went out to see? A man dressed in soft raiment?" (Luke 7:25). Even if 'effeminate' is right, there is disagreement over whether it means homosexual, though many translations of the passage (RSV, NEB and Good News) have it as such.

Jesus does not mention the issue at all, though he is clearly supportive of the disadvantaged. The passage most used therefore is Romans 1:26-27, because it is the only passage which apparently mentions lesbianism in the whole Bible, Old and New. These are people who worship images, (1:23) – this is part of a criticism of pagans, common in Jewish circles. They “exchange the truth about God for a lie; they worship and serve what God has created instead of serving the creator himself” (1:25) Then come the “shameful passions God has given them over to”, “because they do this” (1:26) and a description of people doing shameful acts with each other. Because these people (pagans) do not “keep in mind the true knowledge about God, he has given them over to corrupted minds, so that they do the things that they should not do.” (1:28) Then follows a list of wickedness, evil, greed, jealousy, murder, malice, disobedience to parents, having no conscience and showing no kindness to others (1:29ff). I cannot accept that these are things 'God' has given them over to do, and the description no more correlates with any gay person I know than any 'straight'.

Two alternative views on the passage come from Anglican bishops. Bennett Sims, the former Episcopal bishop of Atlanta, believes that these verses have done more to form Christians' negative opinion of homosexuality than any other single passage in the Bible. He writes: "For most of us who seriously honours Scripture these verses still stand as the capital New Testament text that unequivocally prohibits homosexual behaviour. More prohibitively, this text has been taken to mean that even a same-sex inclination is reprehensible, so that a type of humanity known as 'homosexual' has steadily become the object of contempt and discrimination." (4) Archbishop Rowan Williams put the passage in a wide context in a university address in Toronto in 2007, describing how Paul warns readers not to condemn others: Romans 2:1: "Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things." (King James Version) Rowan Williams summarised it as: "At whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself." He went on to say that the passage favoured neither side in the debate. (5)

Choice of translation is another factor. Some more liberal-minded will see the text as referring to the Greek 'pederasty', where men often chose young slave boys for sexual pleasure. In this case the male part at least can be seen as a condemnation of child abuse.

Others connect with Giles Fraser's comments on the Book of Common Prayer by suggesting it is a condemnation of any non-procreative sex, or is about dominance, or see it as simply unacceptable from a culture allowing polygamy, forcing rape victims to marry their rapist and requiring widows to marry their brother-in-law.(6) If all the other outdated permitted customs of social behaviour have gone, why not that on homosexuality?

God to blame?

I cannot accept that God gives us over to sin, though it is easy to see how those against Christians being gay can interpret that passage as homosexuality taking you away from God, and therefore these are people with corrupt minds. The latter is a traditional way of thinking about people who do not share the traditional faith of the true believer (of whatever faith). But the picture given here of God is not one I would want to follow. Once again, I do not believe that God gives us "over to shameful passions". We choose that ourselves – God does not make people who do not follow him commit sins; people do that from their own selfishness, whether believers or not. If it is true that we have been given over to worshipping and serving what God has created, (and that means sin) why do we here so little condemnation of all the other examples given in the New Testament, often related to the subjects dealt with in other chapters – peace, community, etc.? And how can something even be considered wrong if given to us by a God we are told we should worship?

So we have something listed as wrong, but difficult to resolve with God making people do it as a result of not believing! Not exactly convincing and clearly coming from a culture with very different views about the origins and acceptability of behaviour. There are also other important points. This section of Romans uses words Paul does not use elsewhere and is probably using a common Jewish list of sins which pagans are supposed to commit. Do one, you must do them all! Some have suggested the section is a later addition – though neither of these arguments influences those who see it as the main New Testament word against homosexuality. Another more relevant argument is that Paul (or whoever wrote the passage) and people of his time did not see homosexuality as natural. Therefore it must be wrong. They would also have had similar views about many illnesses which their culture did not understand. In the words of Neil Dawson "If it is correct that some people are born homosexual with no realistic possibility of change, a concept with which Paul would have been unfamiliar, would it therefore mean that Paul's words are invalid? Or might it even mean that Paul's words teach us that for someone who is homosexual by nature it would be unnatural (kata phusin) or exceeding their usual nature (para phusin) to indulge in heterosexual sexual relations?"(7)

Approved same-sex relationships?

People can argue on the detail of translation, but unless you are one who believes everything in a particular translation, it is irrelevant. As suggested earlier, believers in the 'Word of God' as inerrant have major problems in justifying the abuse and wrong done in the name of God. But in this particular debate they also have to explain several Old

Testament passages which suggest God approved same-sex relationships. Ruth and Naomi in Ruth 1:14 have a relationship which uses the same Hebrew word as Genesis 2:24 referring to a man leaving father and mother to be united to his wife, “when the two become one flesh”. David with Jonathan and Daniel with Ashpenaz are also given as probable relationships. One translation (The Living Bible) is so concerned about David and Jonathan kissing each other that it says they “shook hands” (1 Samuel 20).

How can some things be condemned and not others? Even if homosexuality is seen as wrong by some New Testament writers, does that have any relevance today? It is possible to accept that the Bible can accept or condemn something because it was written when it was, but beyond its principles can have no ruling on specific behaviour? If so, the above nit-picking has little point.

Acceptance and culture

As I alluded to earlier in supporting Giles Fraser’s comments on the Book of Common Prayer, we cannot accept interpretations of historical texts except as understood in our very different culture. The same is true of the whole Bible? It only can be so if we accept all the very sub-Christian unpleasantness in behaviour and rules. The understanding we have of God within our society could not have been conceived of by the biblical writers – which is why we need ‘Principles’ and not old rules. In the conditions which then existed in Palestine then and still in some parts of the world well into the twentieth century, most children died before the age of five, many women died giving birth, if a man died it was a brother’s job to give the widow children. In other words for the family, the clan, the tribe to survive in many societies everyone had to be part of the process. It would weaken that poor survival rate even more if someone opted out because of their sexuality. There would be fewer people to look after the old, not enough potential adults to hunt or grow food - the family, the clan, the tribe would die.

The rules to bring everyone into the reproductive cycle may then have been right, but now that argument makes no sense. In our western developed world we live largely as single family units, we have medical services, and we have too many people in the wider world. The rule was right for its time, but what makes it right now? If we have abandoned other customs of the Old Testament, why not those about homosexuality too? Our community is in fact strengthened by gay people - who are much more likely to be working in health and education as well as in the arts, or indeed as priests. If we follow ancient customs and law should we bring back slavery, allow the ethnic cleansing God seems to approve of in Exodus 34, and the abuse of children that our current laws would have us in court for? If we followed biblical rules and culture, no women could be on the electoral roll, let alone be on a church council, and certainly not become a churchwarden or a priest - or indeed a bishop. The argument against was that Jesus didn’t have any female apostles. That’s true: he worked within a culture, but where it was possible he changed things. He healed on the Sabbath, he ate and drank with people seen as sinners, talked to and learned from, touched and healed women and non-Jews, physically threw people out of the Temple. He broke the rules because Principles were more important. For me, it is impossible to accept that one specific rule should be adopted and others

ignored. If we abandon some because they are no longer appropriate, it is difficult to accept others.

Doctrine and myth

Richard Holloway takes another slant, pointing out how Christians have often taken myths and created doctrine(8). His first example is of Baptism to prevent death by original sin – the theory of which comes from the first sin in the Garden of Eden. God addresses the serpent (who loses legs and become a snake thereafter as well as an enemy of the woman’s offspring) and Eve (who we must now blame for any pain in childbirth and the dominance of men) and Adam (forced, as the poor have been ever since, to toil in the ground all the days of his life, trying to avoid thorns and thistles). This mythical event became the origin of baptism to remove inherited ‘original sin’ and gave a chance of salvation, because, as we are still reminded at funerals “You are dust, and to dust you shall return”. Christians have taken myth (including that of Lot and Sodom – as detailed before, a terrible story because it suggests virgin daughters can be offered to be raped by an angry mob – Genesis 19:1-8) to attack homosexuality.

But what if we took a Greek rather than Jewish myth? Holloway tells the story of Zeus, who divided humans into men and women, so that they would spend time competing with each other and then re-unite so they present less challenge to the Gods. It would work out like this:

“Any men who are offcuts from the combined gender – the androgynous one – are attracted to women, and therefore most adulterers come from this group; the equivalent women are attracted to men and tend to become adulteresses. Any women who are offcuts from the female gender aren’t particularly interested in men; they incline more towards women, and therefore female homosexuals come from this group. And any men who are offcuts from the male gender go for males”.(9)

Holloway then adds that it would be “interesting to speculate about what might have become the Christian attitude to sexuality if the Church has borrowed its myths from the Greek rather than the Hebrew tradition”. He then, however, reminds us that much early Christian theology was influenced by Greek philosophy. If that had happened in this instance: “Christian fundamentalists today would be pointing to the inerrant book of Aristophanes to explain its passionate support for gay and lesbian rights which were being threatened by revisionist liberals who refused to accept the historical validity of the speeches in the Symposium”(10). This is less speculative than it may seem, bearing in mind the influence of other Greek philosophy had on early Christianity (see Principles or Rules) but perhaps Holloway should have said the ideas rather than the book of Aristophanes.

The fundamentalist view of homosexuality, particularly focussed on Romans 1:26-27, is flawed, selective and without reason. The main objective of that passage is to give a vision of a God who equates a specific and often loving human relationship with other traditional ‘pagan’ sins – but this God seems to “give them over to shameful passions”, so their sexuality is imposed on them because they do not believe. It is as if no ‘believer’ has ever committed a crime. In Dawson’s view Paul may have been saying that we should

keep to what is natural for each of us. Holloway's speculation about taking on Greek myths is useful in making us understand how we should treat ancient stories.

But for me the most powerful argument is around history and culture and how this fits with the Jesus of principles. Homosexuals are not guilty as a group of any of the actions Jesus condemns. Indeed, statistically I understand they are more likely to be involved in community, art, education and health care than others; that is certainly true of the fifteen I know reasonably well – two are in business but four are clergy, two actors and one a theatrical agent, and one each a physiotherapist, sculptor, counsellor, charity organiser, chef/gardener and health administrator. Jesus' Principles of love and compassion need to be brought into our modern age, so if northern fundamentalists were to take their belief seriously, they would become like the widow who gave her mite, living as the poor who are blessed. Then they would take the principles of Jesus seriously. If we accept the literal truth of some two thousand year old writings we cannot be selfishly selective, and condemn others without removing the plank from our own eye.

Returning to Argentina, whose bishop's words prompted this section, it is worth finishing with some words from a former Buenos Aires cathedral-based Mission Companion, David George.

“How we reconcile these differences is the challenge we face, but a challenge that I think is worth undertaking. Consider the debate over slavery. Christians argued for and against slavery for decades before a consensus was reached. Similarly, there are going to be rivers of ink spilled before we reach agreement on the sexuality debate.

We are living in a culture of instant answers, but the current debate is something we cannot rush. As Anglicans committed to communion, let us take time to share our views and debate sensitively as, together, we seek the will of God”.(11)

George's belief in resolution is perhaps greater than mine. I do not see those on the other side being willing to have a real debate, let alone allowing compromise for 'cultural' reasons. Returning to where this began – not the country but the event. The Lambeth Conference in 1998 proclaimed that homosexuality was not permitted in holy scripture. Quite right. I agree. It is. But the same holy 'Word of God' permits genocide and ethnic cleansing. The Old Testament certainly does not always stress the loving, forgiving and caring nature of God in the way we learn that in the New. Had the International Court at The Hague been around at the time, Joshua from the Battle of Jericho would be joining Radovan Karadzic from Serbia in the dock.

When I returned to college after my time in Namibia the most interesting series of lectures looked at the Old Testament according to the time it was written. The understanding of God developed and matured over centuries. And that continues. Seen in this way, it is so much easier to accept that the Bible is not always ethical and can only be taken seriously if its Principles are applied to our present age. We are still learning about how we deal with the oppressed and how to change the old ways – as Jesus himself wanted. Banning homosexuality is part of the 'old ways' as embarrassing as approving genocide in the name of God.

References:

1. Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement web site www.lgcm.org.uk

2. BBC Radio 4 Thought for the Day, June 18th 2008.
3. BBC Radio 4 Thought for the Day, July 18th 2008.
4. Information from www.religioustolerance.org
5. Op. cit.
6. More on www.religioustolerance.org
7. But the Bible, from the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement www.lgcm.org.uk
8. Richard Holloway, lecture The myth of original sin, Gresham College 29/11/2000.
9. Plato, Symposium, Oxford World Classics, 1994, p.28.
10. Holloway, op cit, p.5.
11. Transmission, Quarterly magazine of USPG: Anglicans in World Mission, summer 08, p. 1.

Chapter 4: Peace

Born in 1945, between VE and VJ days, I grew up with rationing as part of life, and when sugar was still rationed, and even to buy sweets families had to register at a single shop. We used to meet my father when he finished his Friday afternoon shift and go to our chosen shop. Sweets were chosen with great consideration – the best sweets were often the sweetest, so needed the most ration points. Was it to be fewer favourites or enough yucky ones which might last the whole week? Then rationing was abolished. We could buy as much as we liked of whatever we wanted! Then reality arrived. I discovered that money had to change hands too, and the ration stayed the same.

In those days there were many obvious signs of war. As described in ‘Community’, we played in bomb sites, usually buildings, but the best place was a marshy area close to the first Spitfire factory. There were many bomb craters now filled with water and home to frogs and sticklebacks and, with tall reeds, the perfect place for hide-and-seek.

Remembrance Day probably brought more people to church than Christmas, including men from our road I knew by sight but came laden with medals. Veterans are joined by serving troops, cadets, scouts and other youth groups – and, no doubt, by widows and fatherless children.

Living in Southampton we saw much of any large troop movements – from the very sandy-coloured tanks on their way to Suez to the liners taking troops to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands conflict.

The nearest I have been to war has been in Africa, during and after civil wars in Mozambique and Angola. My first experience in Mozambique was a visit to a group of refugees who had escaped the South African backed rebels. They had moved just inside the fifteen mile safe area around the capital city, had no homes or source of income. We passed through numerous checkpoints and met the group under a tree. About a hundred yards away a military tank faced into the rebel-held land. For them, seemingly just inside the safe zone, the important thing was to have a religious event of some kind – that seemed more important than anything. Everything else had been lost but, despite that, faith remained.

At that time it was not possible for the bishop to get beyond the fifteen miles without being part of a military convoy but a few years later I was able to travel with him along a now safe road to his previously inaccessible cathedral. The sides of the road were littered with burned-out lorries and other vehicles, the result of roadside bombs and other attacks. I can't remember seeing a single building without signs of the conflict – except the cathedral. The church-run hospital had been ransacked, staff intimidated, and the whole community suffer. The cathedral service was amazing. People from surrounding villages arrived overnight and in the early morning, singing and carrying bags, the contents of which became clear later. At the offertory each group came forward, dancing and clapping and with what seemed like great delight, waved a few banknotes in the air and threw them into a basket. If they had no cash then the food in those bags was revealed. In one case the food was very much alive – a sheep joined the procession, tied to a pillar, and reminded us of her presence by both sound and smell.

I went to Angola to meet a group which wanted a formal link with the Anglican Church. I stayed with and was taken around by the brother of the leader I was talking to. The brother was a junior government minister, something to do with youth, and he therefore had a car – with a smashed front window, bald tyres, and an AK47. My main memories are of the huge numbers of leg splints, the result of the thousands of landmines used in the internal conflict and the colourful children's clothes, dirty and torn but the only bright thing in a grey and litter-strewn city. As everywhere, the poor suffer the most, even if not directly involved. Faith is clearly important for individuals and communities, though, as the bishop in Mozambique pointed out, any future development in the country would give alternatives to youths In particular, and communities would change.

Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel/Palestine, dominate the news, especially if a British soldier has been killed. Eastern Congo, The Central African Republic and The Sudan take it in turns – it seems our media can only cope with one at a time. One hoped-for result of the ongoing financial mess might be a campaign to at least reduce military spending, but there are also significant arms industry lobbyists. The threshold can be much lower among small radical groups and some powerful nations. Of the latter, an example was the Russian invasion of Georgia, which at surface level was a reaction to the treatment of their citizens living over the border, but was as much a clear warning to the rest of Eastern Europe – especially those accepting American missile warning sites or joining NATO. There are few countries with no military forces (Costa Rica is one) or remain neutral at times of major international disputes (Switzerland being the HQ of the United Nations for that reason.

Churches and individual Christians have a similar wide variety views, including 'Just War' and 'Pacifism', and with some believing God is backing or even demanding their action. Methodology as well as well as questions around just cause have also concerned many – we have just passed the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Bishop George Bell, who opposed Winston Churchill's blanket-bombing of German cities during the Second World War. Just as civilians suffered then, so it is the poor and vulnerable – kidnapped and forced child soldiers included - who are still the usual innocent victims of violence and warfare. Around two-thirds of the world's poor live in areas of conflict and Mahbub ul Jaq, the founder of the Human Development Report, has identified responsibility: "The many desperately poor nations spend much more on arms than on education and health of

the people. Where the five permanent Security Council members supply 86 percent of arms to the poor nations giving handsome subsidies to the arms exporters. How brilliantly we have chosen the custodians of our global security.”(1)

Peace in the Bible

We should put the poor and vulnerable, including victims of war, at the centre of our concern if we are to follow Jesus’ Principles, but what does Christian scripture say on all this?

There are many horrendous Old Testament stories in which God is supposedly supporting one side in a war, as well as the genocide which was part of the military process. The fate of women and children in Jericho after Joshua’s victory is just one well-known example. As will be explored later, some of these texts are used to justify current conflicts. But some prophets thought differently. Jeremiah spoke of peoples’ hopes some five and a half centuries before Jesus, words which must be heard today in so many war-torn areas: “We had hoped for peace but no good has come, for a time of healing but there was only terror”. (Jeremiah.8:15) Commenting on this, Philippa Smale says: “This terror has been almost continuous in the history of humankind. There have been times when there has been an absence of war – but the absence of war does not define peace. The definition of peace has to be positive – a presence, not an absence, active not passive”(2) Isaiah describes how people in his day as well as ours distort the truth by suggesting false solutions to real or potential conflicts: “The way of peace they do not know, there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads, no-one who walks in them will know peace. (Isaiah.59:8)

In the New Testament the ‘roots’ of war are clearly in human behaviour, at least according to James: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. (James 4:1-2) ‘Peace’ as a symbol appears frequently. The incarnation was announced by the angels as a time of ‘Peace on Earth’. (Luke.2:14) When Jesus sent out his disciples on their first missionary journeys, he said “Let your first words be ‘Peace to this house’”. (Luke.10:5) In the first post-resurrection story, when Jesus met the same men hiding behind locked doors, afraid of violence from the Jews, his own first words were “Peace be with you”. (Luke.24:36, John.20:19) It was one of his trademarks: “Peace be with you - as my Father has sent me, so I send you”. (John.20:21) In his Sermon on the Mount he states clearly: “God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God”. (Matthew.5:9) Later in 6:35 we are told to love our enemies: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful”. He practices what he preaches. The most poignant example is at the time of his arrest. The sword must be put back in its sheath because those who resort to violence will suffer the same. (Matthew.26:51f) And he expects the same of us too: "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If it did belong to this world, my servants would fight." (John.18:36)

These specific references to peace are part of a wider ethical stance, of which a good example is Luke 6:27-33: “But I tell you who hear me: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If

someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to give him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you". All this, and in a sense the ethical stance on war and peace, is summarised in the next two verses: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that".

This idea of self-sacrifice as a necessary part of life in preventing further conflict is there in both the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen and in St. Paul's writing. As Stephen was being stoned to death he appealed to the Lord to forgive those responsible. In Romans 12:17-21 we are told not to repay evil for evil, not to revenge and to live at peace as far as it depends on us. By feeding the hungry enemy, good will overcome evil. Christians are the "scum of the earth", "because when cursed, we bless and we are like those condemned to die in the arena". (1Corinthians 4:9-13) Paul finishes what is called his second letter to Corinth with a simple message: "Aim for perfection ... be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you". (2 Corinthians 13:11)

Continued tradition

This call to peace was taken to heart by the early Church. In an address on 'The Just War Tradition', John Reardon summed up the stance taken: "In Jesus peace is proclaimed and demonstrated as the way people should relate to each other".(3) He then details some early Church history, including Tertullian who wrote: "In disarming Peter Christ, unbelted every soldier", and Origen, who responded to accusations of Christians being disloyal because they would not take military service by saying that they had become: "children of peace, for the sake of Jesus". Things changed when Christianity became Rome's official religion – from them being prohibited to join the army to it being compulsory to be a Christian in order to join. As Reardon then adds, "The transformation was complete. From being a persecuted minority, Christians became a dominant presence within Roman society and they had to face up to the challenge of government and the maintenance of security". The debate on whether Christians should support a 'just' war and, of course, the definition of that, have continued ever since. Those supporting the earlier Christian tradition have included Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century and Martin Luther King in the twentieth.

Can war still be 'Just'?

The Just War theory has defining criteria but many of these present problems. War must be waged by a legitimate authority, have a just cause, be formally declared, have the right intention, be the last resort and have a reasonable chance of success. Each of these can be objected to as they depend on subjective decisions. A rebel breakaway group may well see itself as legitimate, having a just cause, etc. Christians have problems with 'cause', which the UN says should be in response to aggression, but a contrary view is that the only just cause can be the fate of the neighbour, the object of love. Many argue that

‘intention’ of war can never be just – the only intention can be peace. Two further criteria seem impossible, particularly in nuclear warfare – the protection of non-combatants and ‘means proportionate to the end’. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see either of these applied to either side in Iraq or in any conflict where remote weapons or roadside bombs are used. There is even argument that legitimate defence is pointless if invaded. Less harm would be done to accept it and work in other ways might have better results – despite some continuing problems, Eastern Europe eventually got independence from the Soviet Union. The counter argument may be that more lives will be saved and justice done if the criteria are met, but with results so uncertain it is so difficult to argue for any ‘reasonable chance of success’.

Success? - Not always a good story

Many church goers say to each other during worship: “Peace be with you”, presumably because it is believed to be a Christian thing to do to continue the biblical greeting, and is hopefully more than just a corporate version of ‘Good morning’. We can start in our own church community to behave in the way we know we should then behave outside. But is it real and, if it is, how do we sell this to the world?

It’s not new to say that religion often seems to divide our world. Despite the agreements in political terms in Northern Ireland, the continuation of separate Roman Catholic schools from the therefore largely Protestant State Schools as well as other denominational schools, means it will be harder for the communities to learn to respect each other - children will continue to make friends and learn to be different from others because of the schools they go to. How will this help the new peace to become permanent? And in many Muslim communities today any family member who converts to any other faith faces being totally ostracised, cut off from any contact with the rest of the family. Those who ignore customs on marriage can face family violence and even death. Christian Missionaries who made converts often divided communities by favouring converts with education. When members of our families become Jehovah’s Witnesses we may find they want nothing more to do with any of us. Hinduism and politics are intertwined in India and can produce conflict with Christians, Muslims and Sikhs. As many of our critics tell us, religion, or at least the way it is practised, is a source of division and conflict in our world.

The London Review of Books is sent monthly by a good friend who thinks I should keep my mind active. A brief review of *Burning to Read* (4) spoke of: “An illuminating book that reminds us of the sources, and profound consequences, of Christian fundamentalism in the 16th century. The last wave of fundamentalism ... provoked 150 years of violent upheaval, as we approach a second wave, this powerful book alerts us to our peril”.(5)

The USA – two very different views

1. Fundamentalist and right-wing Evangelicals

We will come to British Church views later, but the divisions between Christians are most obvious and most public in the USA. Those against abortion, in favour of Creationism and challenging the idea of global warming joined with extreme nationalists

in campaigning for votes from Evangelicals in the 2008 presidential election. Though highlighted then, the divisions were there before and continue now.

In that same London Review of Books was a much longer fascinating article by Nicholas Guyatt, reviewing Chris Hedges' book *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*.⁽⁶⁾ Chris is quoted as an author who sees an evangelical movement trying to get a government based on their interpretation of scripture rather than the constitution. "This movement", he argues, "is not interested in dialogue or rational thought. It will distort, suppress or otherwise crush the opinions of its opponents". The reviewer is not as sure as Chris Hedges, arguing that "For all their organising skills, squabbles and fault lines divide the would-be theocrats". Guyatt also looks at other books that see "religious conservatives in the USA (as) incubating a form of fascism that could eventually destroy America's political and intellectual traditions".

Fundamentalist interpretations of faith are present in much of the Christian world and within the current USA political framework have specific and possibly frightening consequences. One veteran preacher Hal Lindsey urges his television audience to support Israel unconditionally and the US government to launch a pre-emptive strike on Iran. Another evangelical leader, John Hagee, who has programmes on 190 television channels earning \$100m a year, has built a lobby group to work on Congress members to support the same policies - his recent book urging the US to attack Iran sold more than 700,000 copies in a few months.⁽⁷⁾ Justification is based on the book of Esther. He also suggests that any bombing of Tehran may have consequences described in Ezekiel 38 and 39.

These are among the more hideous of OT passages, and include verses such as "Denounce him (Gog) and tell him that I, the sovereign Lord, am his enemy. I will turn him round, put hooks in his jaws and drag him and his troops away" (38:3-4). "You will decide to invade a helpless country where the people live in peace and security ... you will plunder and loot" (38:11-12). And this man attacking a place of peace is to be the instrument of God: "You will attack my people Israel like a storm moving across the land. When the time comes, I will send you to invade my land in order to show the nations who I am, to show my holiness by what I do through you" (38:16-17). This invasion, seemingly the instrument of God, has punishment at its centre: "The Sovereign Lord says: 'On the day that Gog invades Israel, I will be furious ... I will terrify Gog with all sorts of calamities ... His men will turn their swords against one another. I will punish him with disease and bloodshed ... In this way I will show all the nations that I am great and that I am holy. They will know then that I am the Lord'" (selected from 38:18-23).

Many commentators admit that this is a difficult passage and, without wanting to investigate Hagee's views too deeply, he seems to believe that Iran is being persuaded by God to want to invade God's holy people, but that this is something which will result in failure. Yet Ezekiel seems not to involve the people of Israel at all; even more strangely, they are living in undefended cities. It is difficult to see how this fits with Hagee's desire to invade Iran and it would be hard to describe either the USA or Israel as undefended. In some respects it would be easy for Iranians reading Ezekiel to deduce the opposite. Relatively undefended (compared with the USA which accounts for around 50% of the world's total armament expenditure), they are under threat from a power sent to invade, which might be punished as it is not supported by God.

2. Liberal alternatives

The above example of fundamentalism may seem more than a bit extreme, and there are also liberal evangelicals in the USA. The best-known is ex-president Jimmy Carter, a born-again Baptist who pressured Israel to return captured land to Egypt and even appointed a humanist as his vice-President. After leaving office he continued projecting a more liberal stance than those who followed him. On 9th March 2003 he wrote an article 'Just War ... or a Just War?' in the New York Times. Commenting on the Iraq war, he felt that it was "an almost universal conviction of religious leaders" that it did not meet the criteria for a Just War.

"The war can be waged only as a last resort, with all nonviolent options exhausted. In the case of Iraq, it is obvious that clear alternatives to war exist. These options -- previously proposed by our own leaders and approved by the United Nations -- were outlined again by the Security Council ... But now, with our own national security not directly threatened and despite the overwhelming opposition of most people and governments in the world, the United States seems determined to carry out military and diplomatic action that is almost unprecedented in the history of civilized nations...The peace it establishes must be a clear improvement over what exists. Although there are visions of peace and democracy in Iraq, it is quite possible that the aftermath of a military invasion will destabilize the region and prompt terrorists to further jeopardize our security at home. Also, by defying overwhelming world opposition, the United States will undermine the United Nations as a viable institution for world peace".

The liberal Christian magazine, Sojourners, commented on his later book Palestine: Peace not Apartheid. He was seen as the one who "has done more internationally to promote peace and reconciliation than any other world leader". Sojourners calls itself "Christians for Justice and Peace", and they promote and publicise events and stories. One story is of the two bodies being sent from Iraq to the USA for autopsy. Both had been detainees. One was an Iraqi, and one a member of a Christian Peacemaker Team. He was one of three who had been held by an Iraqi group for 118 days. The other two survived. The Presbyterian minister to the Team, Elizabeth Pyles, wrote: "Such a fitting end: Tom and an Iraqi detainee side by side in death, ministered to by young soldiers from Tom's home. No more anger, no more fear, no more violence, only kindness and peace. How many more will die before moments of peace for the dead are transformed into a lasting peace for the living?"(8) On the same issue, long before the USA Presidential election, they were promoting a day of prayer and action to be held 100 days after the candidate took office.(9) This was on behalf of yet another liberal Christian organisation: Christian Peace Witness for Iraq.(10)

A useful summary of one pacifist biblical stance is given as an appendix to this chapter.

Peace on earth?

Returning to the New Testament, there are some words of Jesus which at first reading suggest the opposite. In Luke 12: 49-54, Jesus seems to be both de-prioritising peace and suggesting it is not an objective. He seems almost to be predicting that our faith will divide us rather than bring us together - just as in Northern Ireland or within families

divided by different faiths. “Do you suppose I came to establish peace on earth? No indeed, I have come to bring division. For from now on, five members of a family will be divided, three against two and two against three; father against son and son against father”. What all that about? Is he being sarcastic because he knows we are going to fail his high standards? That is very unlike the Jesus I have tried to portray so far. So what is he going on about? “I have come to set fire to the earth ... do you suppose I came to establish peace?”

Maybe this is a prophecy because Jesus knows exactly the kind of people we are. In the preceding verses of the same chapter in Luke we are told that all the hairs on our head have been counted - everything we do and say is known to God and nothing is hidden from him; we are told not to fear those who merely kill the body; we are told of the stupidity of depending on our own resources; we are told to prepare for ourselves things which do not wear out; we are told to be ready for when he comes and not be like lazy servants who only turn up for work when they think the boss is coming; we are told not to lay up treasures. We’ve been warned, we’ve been told what’s coming, and yet, because Jesus knows us so well, he knows we won’t listen and the result of his message is like a fire over the earth - a fire we can’t see coming because we are blind.

It’s not as if one side of the religious argument in any country is necessarily right and the other wrong, or that one side of the family divide about a member who adopts another faith is right about what is true, and the other side is wrong. The fire Jesus promises is not for one side only - the side we think is wrong. But that fire, which Jesus calls the baptism he is about to undergo (his own death, in other words) that fire is the consequence of the divisions we invent because we can see no further than our own needs. Jesus seems to predict not only that he has to die because people will not understand what he is revealing, but also that people of all ages in human history will be the same and will not be able to either see the need for real peace or to act on what he is setting before us.

The peace he speaks of is something to which the majority of people of all denominations and all faiths are equally blind and historically no one faith seems better than any other. It is peace with justice. In the early years of the church, Jews and Gentiles formed a new community of believers, and we know of the struggles then around what now seem details such as what could be eaten and whether boys needed to be circumcised. It’s all there in the New Testament - and out of it grew for a short while a new community, in which male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor were all equal. It survived for a short while despite everyone having to do the hardest thing - give up the power one group had over another. Peace came with justice, but it seems that was something they couldn’t hold on to and that early Christian experiment in equality and community failed.

Undoubtedly the most important element in the creation of this community was the belief that Jesus would ‘come again’ within their own lifetime, but as their members died they realised this was not true. All the sharing soon stopped and the divisions began again. Like us today, few people could handle the loss of power or trust others with their lives. (Acts 2:43-47).

A bit later, both Islam and Sikhism tried the same. Each had in their beginnings a seeking for peace with justice. Like Christians they soon failed and like Christians they still fail, but all have at their heart an ideal of a peace in which all will serve God and each other - love God and love neighbour - peace and justice.

A shrinking world

Peace is today more important than ever in what we call our global village - a world which is shrinking in terms of communication, transport, trade and politics. Odd though it seems, the sudden shrinking of the world in the last few decades has created new distances and barriers, and more divisions, because we are all much more aware of each other. As the extremes of poverty and wealth become more obvious, so we get more insecurities and more demands for our own position not to diminish. The climate change debate shows this – developing countries feel they should be allowed to get to the stage the more developed have reached; the developed want to exchange their carbon footprint for those producing less. It is impossible for any politician to survive by suggesting anything different, but as the shortage of resources increases tension, poverty and migration, then political and economic differences may well lead to conflict at any number of levels. With rapid climate change and increased use, the availability of water might become the biggest divisive factor. Peace-making becomes even more urgent.

British Churches and Peace

Churches have to show a lead here, so what are we doing in Britain? One has ‘Army’ in their title, so what do they think? In the website list of Salvation Army policy statements there is no link to ‘Peace’ but there is one on ‘Conscientious Objection’ (interestingly, the USA equivalent has ‘Military Service’). They offer pastoral support to all, irrespective of their stance, and do not “regard a conscientious objector with any sense of stigma”. (11) This decision is based on “scriptural teaching concerning respect for properly constituted civil authority”. But they disagree with that same ‘properly constituted’ authority on nuclear weapons. This is part of another wider statement on how the world's problems cannot be solved by force, and concern about financial investment in the arms industry. Nuclear disarmament by all nations is seen to be necessary for world peace as the result of any nuclear conflict would be “almost too frightful to contemplate”. But they do not advocate unilateral action, and see each nation as having the right to defend itself (with nuclear weapons?).

There are good records for other churches engaging with anti-nuclear issues, not least the Church of Scotland, which has consistently opposed nuclear weapons for the UK as well as for Israel and others. In their Church and Nation Committee Report to the 2004 General Assembly they looked at Iraq in the context of how other countries such as Libya were dealt with, as well as wider matters such as terrorism and vulnerability. On the decision to invade Iraq they recognised that it took place without United Nations approval, that no that weapons of mass destruction were found and thousands of innocent people lost their lives. While condemning terrorism they called for a full public inquiry into the UK decisions to join with the United States of America. They also “Stand in solidarity with our sister churches in the United States of America, recognising their strongly advocated alternative vision for American policy to that being enacted by the Bush Administration, and encourage their continued advocacy of this vision”. (12)

Other churches have also shown concern about aspects of war and particularly the decision to invade Iraq, although not taking a pacifist stance. In January 2006, the Church of England commented through its Public Affairs Unit to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, which was looking at the decision to invade Iraq. The group was not trying to provide answers but raise questions, such as: was there good evidence, were other methods considered and were results really predictable? One example of their concern was the ‘pre-emptive strike’, which appears to go against the Just War criteria of defence as reaction to invasion or other specific hostility.

“From an ethical perspective the justice of a pre-emptive attack requires demonstrable and compelling evidence of the hostile intent and capability of a perceived aggressor. Moreover just war theory requires that other less belligerent means of averting the threat must have been considered and found wanting for good cause. Pre-emptive action can itself be destabilising to and a breach of international peace. As a result it is crucial that states considering pre-emptive action have more than probable cause to believe they must attack”.(13)

Mainstream churches clearly look at how and whether governments are or have kept the Just War criteria. Statements from leaders such as Rowan Williams (14) add a little pressure, but criticism frequently deters them from further involvement because it is not their role, they have no expertise and are even being unpatriotic. The report quoted above is one way of dealing with this, asking rather than telling, but with strong suggestions of which side the questions come from. But it is interesting to find all this on the Church of England web site under ‘war’, while a search under ‘peace’ produces links mostly to prayer.

Only Pacifism can bring peace

Other Christians want to go further. There are pressure groups such as the Peace Pledge Union. While regarding itself as a secular organisation, it was founded in 1934 by Canon Dick Sheppard of London's St. Paul's Cathedral. Originally for men only, it was aware of possible future conflicts, and targeted potential conscripts. Today perhaps now best known for its white poppies, it also produces material for schools, including stories from conscientious objectors. (15) The issue is important for many organisations outside the Christian mainstream. Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and Christadelphians are all against any involvement in warfare. Christadelphians would see themselves as ‘conscientious objectors’ rather than ‘pacifist’, because coercion and conflict may be needed to establish Christ's Kingdom, but are against all human conflict. This is shown in their internal decisions too, but they and the others rely on scripture for their reasoning. “Blessed are the peacemakers”, (Matthew. 5:9) “Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you” (Matthew. 5:44) and “Love is patient, Love is kind” (1Corinthians 13:4-7) are among the texts most commonly used for refusing to fight in the armed forces and also to direct the way we treat our neighbours.

There are also what are called the Historic Peace Churches, with a long record of advocacy and preaching against slavery and war. The best-known of these in the UK are the Quakers. Examples of their concern include Quaker Peace & Social Witness (16) which, on behalf of other churches too, runs the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme

in Palestine and Israel (IAPPI) which sends volunteers to be with some of those involved in non-violent action and to monitor and report on violations of human rights. They also have a Human Security Pilot project which aims to identify and analyse links between environmental degradation, economic injustice and human security and to develop understanding of how these work. They take human security from a UN definition: "to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment." In UN jargon this means protecting fundamental freedoms; protecting people from severe and widespread threats; using processes to build on people's strengths and aspirations and creating the political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity.

Hansuli Gerber, who leads the World Council of Churches 'Decade to Overcome Violence', reminded me that while the Church of the Brethren and the Mennonites have been active more world-wide, historically only the Quakers were in the UK. But the London Mennonite Centre, originally a children's home in London after WW 2, became a resource, study and meeting place. They have led discussions with and influenced UK evangelicals over the past decades and also founded a mediation activity called Bridgebuilders. Other initiatives include the Metanoia Book Service and Ecclesia Think Tank with its news service and web site, growing out of the Anabaptist network in the UK. (17)

Apart from some extremists, churches are against war except in specific circumstances, and are involved in action and pressurising governments. While more could be achieved by greater commitment to pacifism and through working together and with other faith groups, many are also acting across the board, seeing the value of the combining peace initiatives with social and economic change.

Principles apply

In 'Back to the Beginning' I have shown the three areas of Principle that Jesus expounded: priority to the vulnerable and the outcast and an old world that needs a fundamental change. In a world where terror is seen to be a major concern and yet wars seem to increase rather than decrease it, we have to adjust perceptions. Peace is a demand of Jesus, and something which would help his Principles to be established.

It is the poor and vulnerable who always suffer the most in any conflict and who would benefit the most from new standards of international and civil relations. They are the victims of landmines (as in Somalia), of sexual abuse (Eastern Congo), loss of housing (Christians by nationalist Hindus in India), or vehicles loaded with bombs (Iraq is where we hear of this the most). It is the children of the poor who are forced to join armies (in Uganda) and it is those who feel discrimination who are more likely to join radical groups (including a tiny minority of Muslims in the UK). (18)

Churches have huge international networks and could play an even bigger role in changing international relations, especially if less centred on their internal disputes – one of which is the subject of the next chapter. The groupings and loyalties we all have need

to be broken up, but what we have to look for are new universal ones. Real peace will be beyond nation and beyond faith.

That is a real peace - the peace Christians should have; the peace that the story of Jesus begins and ends with. It doesn't mean just giving up a little here and there and meeting in the middle - that's compromise, not peace. Peace means looking outside to new possibilities for all of us, perhaps giving up all that we hold dear. That's the fire Jesus brought, that's the decision he provokes, that's the challenge he gives us, and now is the time it is facing its greatest test. This peace would lead to the real salvation of so much of our divided world.

Appendix

The Pacifist Christian group have identified five major themes in Jesus' ministry which should guide us on this issue:

1. Christians love their enemies. (Mt. 5:44) A model Jesus showed in practice at his own crucifixion.
2. Christians use the weapons of the Spirit. (Eph. 6:10-18) Human weapons destroy, spiritual weapons are the full armour of God.
3. Christians are ambassadors for Jesus. (2Cor. 5:18-20) Just as national Ambassadors are excluded from war declared by the host nation, Christians should exclude themselves.
4. Christians forgive their debtors. Literally, (Mt. 6:12) and also forgive enemies. (Mt. 18:21-35)
5. Christians follow a higher calling. (1John 3:12-16) Life on earth is short and must focus on loving God and one another. Being involved in war demonstrates the opposite.

References

1. Mahbub Ul Haq, lecture, Is it a compassionate society? at The State of The World Forum, 11/1997. www.geni.org Original grammar.
2. Philippa Smale, Walking the path of peace, UK Salvation Army, www.salvationarmy.org.uk
3. John Reardon, address to the United Reformed Church Peace Fellowship, November 2006. Accessible on www.urc.org.uk
4. James Simpson, Burning to Read, English fundamentalism and its Reformation opponents, Harvard University Press, 2007.
5. London Review of Books, 15/11/2007.
6. Chris Hedges, American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America, Free Press, 2007.
7. John Hagee, Jerusalem Countdown, Frontline, 2006.
8. Quoted in 118 Days Christian Peacemaker Teams Held Hostage in Iraq, ed. Tricia Gates Brown, Christian Peacemaker Teams, 2008.
9. Sojourners. www.sojourners.com
10. Christian Peace Witness for Iraq, www.christianpeacewitness.org

11. UK Salvation Army, www.salvationarmy.org.uk
12. Details in www.churchofscotland.org.uk/society/socissues
13. 'War' in www.cofe.anglican.org
14. The Archbishop's web site www.archbishopofcantebury.org has 252 references to peace and 159 to war, the latter including a deeply thought through lecture to the Royal Institute for International Affairs in 2003.
15. Peace Pledge Union, www.ppu.org.uk
16. www.quaker.org.uk/peace Also [/iappi](http://www.quaker.org.uk/iappi)
17. Personal contacts, referred web site www.ekklesia.co.uk
18. This has been recognised by the senior intelligence officer in the USA, George Tenet, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, who said in a speech in December 2002: "We cannot win the war on terror simply by defeating and dismantling al-Qaeda. To claim victory, we and our allies will need to address the circumstances that bring peoples to despair, weaken governments, and create power vacuums that extremists are all too ready to fill". Speech at Nixon Center Distinguished Service Award Banquet, from the CIA web site.

[Chapter 5: Memories](#)

Detention

I've only been in detention twice – and I'm not talking about school. That was many more times.

In 1971 I was the head teacher of a unique school in Namibia. The country was then occupied by South Africa, so the apartheid rules applied. Apartheid separated everybody by race – in land, housing, medical facilities, transport, marriage and jobs. I once saw an ambulance turn round and leave a road accident victim who was the wrong colour. We were in a Bantustan, a black area designed to be so that self-sufficiency was hard and industry forbidden. Men left their families and went to work in white-owned mines and were allowed home once a year.

The school was unique because it was the only English-medium high school for blacks. South Africa wanted Afrikaans as then no-one would have access to outside ideas.

We were part of a mission station with two schools, a hospital, a seminary and various other support bits. We heard one day that one of our churches had been taken over by a new black-only group sponsored by the government to eliminate our non-discriminatory Anglican Church.

Something had to be done. The service that Sunday was to be taken by a seventy year old black priest, so it was decided I would accompany him. It was about sixty miles, first on a sandy track past baobab trees and the fields of millet – for budgies here but staple food there. And then on the main north-south highway. Being in a black area it wasn't tarred, but the main danger was where trees came close to the road on bends. Here people would sometimes push a sick animal in front of the car, claiming of course that it was their prize breeder.

We arrived to find only about a tenth of the normal congregation not scared off. The door was locked, the lock itself changed. A bigger, less friendly crowd was gathering. They wouldn't challenge a white man, so it was left to me to break in. I found a slightly open window, forced it a little and climbed in. The faithful few scuttled in. We then had another problem. None of the bits and pieces we needed. Another break-in, this time through the roof of the vestry.

As the service progressed, more gathered outside. Police arrived too but unusually did not attack what they would call a mob, because it was led by that local government – sponsored man, whom we discovered we knew. He had been rejected by our church for corruption. But the black police could not arrest me.

A white policeman was called. Scarcely out of school and, like many local officials, probably sent to this remote area because of incompetence or misdemeanour. He was highly embarrassed, trying to balance white authority against white dignity. He whispered “I have to detain you, but come quietly, just walk to the station with me please”.

Once there, he was completely lost. Being Sunday, there was no senior officer around, and when I started on about how I would refer this illegal takeover to authorities in Cape Town who owned the church, then he got really worried. I began to feel sorry for him. He must have thought I'd meant government and not the church offices.

I could almost see his mind ticking through the options. Arrest – and show the support he should for government policy, but appear to be giving in to a black mob, and possibly face derision, if not chastisement from colleagues. Or release me, possibly letting go a previously undetected communist terrorist – something he'd been taught had to be true of anyone who opposed apartheid. He'd perhaps heard that the previous bishop of this strange church had been deported and the present one was even more dodgy.

In the end the decision was clear. The black mob could not be seen to win. Racism released me. I was white.

The second was very different. I always advised volunteers never to take anything which was not their own from one country to another, unless they knew the content and the sender. I kept the first rule but the second proved to be the problem. The sender was a church worker in Lesotho. On arrival in Mozambique I quickly found the immigration officer and handed him the package. He got me through the entry process very quickly. This was in response to my help from his relative in Lesotho. I only learned how this was a disaster when I came to leave. They had asked for a paper revealing the currencies I had brought in but the officer had been so pleased that he had failed to process me.

I was taken into a small room and my wallet was taken. I was told that my money had been brought in illegally since no form had been completed. It soon became obvious that the officer wanted some of the contents but if I offered some I could also be accused of bribery. I stalled by failing to understand Portuguese and I was saved by a senior government minister who just happened to be in the queue for the same plane.

Early Times

I don't remember much of my parents. Though it might seem odd, I remember more of my father, even though he was in hospital much of the time for two major lung operations or recuperating from when I was around five years old until he died when I was thirteen. He then looked a bit like me, thin and bony, though ten years younger than I am now. He was six foot, two and a half inches tall and always slim. Born in India, where his father was in the Durham Light Infantry. Some say he looked a bit like a Sikh, so perhaps there was something going on that no-one talked about.

My mother kept strangely quiet even if we joked about it many years later. But she never talked to any of us three children about his illness and I heard him say, deliberately loudly, that "they need to be told I'm dying". I was only allowed into his bedroom once in his last few weeks, sent to choir practice the day he died and to school on the day of his funeral.

My earliest memory was of him swimming, wearing one of those old costumes looking like a vest in the top half. That was in the river behind our house where I discovered I could swim too on the day my car-tyre float floated past.

Most are similar little snippets, like at junior school. I remember him waiting for me on the way home, sitting on the grass on Peartree Green, I remember him watching me play football with the rest of my class on Freemantle Common and then talking with my teacher. How could he do that? Teachers were like gods – we got dragged out in front of assembly if we'd not noticed our teacher on the opposite side of the road and not raised our cap! How could my father talk to him! I remember him with me watching my school team playing what we knew as Bitterne cracked eggs (Bitterne was the next suburb from my school in Itchen, Southampton). My father called them Bitterne CV. It was years before I realised it was C of E, but I do remember we won thirteen – nil.

My father himself spent twelve years in India in the same regiment, reaching the exalted level of band corporal. By the time I was around he was a constable in the railway police in Southampton Docks. I heard he never got promoted because he was reported by wealthy trans-Atlantic passengers, who, standing in front of a massive piece of black and white metal with two enormous red and black funnels, would say "Tell me, my man, where's Queen Elizabeth?" and get a reply suggesting either Buckingham Palace or using their eyes.

When he got ill he was put on light duty, which normally meant sitting in one of the dock gate booths, inspecting lorries going in and out. In the early 1950's most unloading was by hand, carrying bananas, bags of other fruit and boxes of other goods. Workers were recruited day by day from huge jostling crowds of men outside the gates. It seemed that one common practice, tolerated if not accepted, was that a certain number of bags or boxes would be badly put together or sadly dropped. Foremen made sure the proportion was about right, and most went home happy, including lorry drivers, who seemed sometimes to badly load a box which fell off near the policeman. We also seemed to have rather a lot of cutlery at home donated by shipping companies.

I enjoyed the rare trip to the police booths, always warm, tea on the go, lots going on – and the smoke, which in those days was just part of being with a man. I remember my favourite

Place, next to where the railway crossed a road into the docks. There was a tiny signal box where I was allowed to test my very tiny muscles on levers much higher than I was then. But the best bit was T9 number 120. I was so proud that they'd numbered my favourite steam engine after my father, policeman 120.

When my father finished an afternoon shift on a Friday we would meet him off the 'floating bridge' – a steam ferry which pulled itself across the River Itchen by a huge iron chain. We would feed the swans while waiting – something prohibited shortly after as so many were being reckless and victims of the ferry. We'd then all go to my favourite shop. In those days, shortly after the war, sugar was still rationed, and even to buy sweets families had to register at a single shop. Ours was in Bridge Road, just up from the ferry. At Christmas we got something covered in cotton wool – Father Christmas' shoe or his house. Inside you had to rummage for the sweets. The rest of the year sweets were chosen with great consideration – the best sweets were often the sweetest, so needed the most ration points. Was it to be fewer favourites or enough yucky ones which might last the whole week? Then rationing was abolished. We could buy as much as we liked of whatever we wanted! Then reality arrived. I discovered that money had to change hands too, and the ration stayed the same.

People didn't take many photos in those days, and one of the best is not of him, but by him. All the rest of us are sitting on a beach on the Isle of Wight. We are laughing our heads off because to get us all in the photo he had stepped back down the steep sand and was falling backwards just as a large wave was coming up behind him.

I didn't see much of father after those early years. Dad (we always called them mum and dad, odd I haven't used that word before) was then in hospital or recuperation for years. His surgeon predicted rightly that in twenty years he'd be able to replace his lungs, but oddly added that giving up smoking was not essential. In those days children were not allowed to visit in hospital (my mother was only allowed two hours on Wednesday and Saturday) and I saw him just once, in the hospital garden, sitting under a strawberry tree.

The emphysema was incurable. He came home and even went back to work. He bought a motorbike because ordinary cycling was impossible but my older brother, then fifteen or so, had to kick-start it for him as he was too weak to do it himself. The last of those very few photos I have of him is on his motorbike, riding round the bend to take him up our 1 in 6 hill away from the river, over the green where he had met me from school, past our old sweet shop, over the Floating Bridge, past my favourite signal box, perhaps waiting for his own engine number 120 to cross the road.

I have far fewer memories of my mother. This might be because she didn't have anything exciting like a steam engine named (or at least numbered) after her. But, more than anything, it is because she hated fuss. Perhaps the classic example is a little later in life when I was working from home across the other side of Southampton. One day she fell over at home and hurt her wrist. Instead of phoning me, she puffed her way up that 1-in-6 hill, no doubt pausing at the top, before walking a mile or so to her doctor's surgery. There she was told to go to Accident and Emergency. Again, no phone call. She caught a bus to the hospital, was admitted, but had to wait three days to allow her blood pressure to get near normal before they could operate. I heard from her on day two – would I please go and get some clean knickers from home.

When I was much younger she was coping with so much that was difficult – a sick husband on reduced pay and then the ‘widow’s mite’ pension.

Experiences of War

Born in 1945, between VE and VJ days, I grew up with many obvious signs of war. We played in bomb sites, usually buildings, but the best place was a marshy area close to the first Spitfire factory. There were many bomb craters now filled with water and home to frogs and sticklebacks and, with tall reeds, the perfect place for hide-and-seek.

Remembrance Day probably brought more people to church than Christmas, including men from our road I knew by sight but came laden with medals. Veterans are joined by serving troops, cadets, scouts and other youth groups – and, no doubt, by widows and fatherless children.

Living in Southampton we saw much of any large troop movements – from the very sandy-coloured tanks on their way to Suez to the liners taking troops to the Malvinas/Falkland Islands conflict.

When I was in Southampton I used to do occasional ‘Thought for the Day’ for local radio. At the time of the Falklands war I spoke of how toy shops were doing well selling war toys and children were killing Argentineans in playground – people they had probably never heard of. A few nights later someone broke into my garage, put a piece of cloth into my petrol tank and set fire to it.

The nearest I have been to war has been in Africa, during and after civil wars in Mozambique and Angola. My first experience in Mozambique was a visit to a group of refugees who had escaped the South African backed rebels. They had moved just inside the fifteen mile safe area around the capital city, had no homes or source of income. We passed through numerous checkpoints and met the group under a tree. About a hundred yards away a military tank faced into the rebel-held land. For them, seemingly just inside the safe zone, the important thing was to have a religious event of some kind – that seemed more important than anything. Everything else had been lost but, despite that, faith remained.

At that time it was not possible for the bishop to get beyond the fifteen miles without being part of a military convoy but a few years later I was able to travel with him along a now safe road to his previously inaccessible cathedral. The sides of the road were littered with burned-out lorries and other vehicles, the result of roadside bombs and other attacks. I can’t remember seeing a single building without signs of the conflict – except the cathedral. The church-run hospital had been ransacked, staff intimidated, and the whole community suffer. The cathedral service was amazing. People from surrounding villages arrived overnight and in the early morning, singing and carrying bags, the contents of which became clear later. At the offertory each group came forward, dancing and clapping and with what seemed like great delight, waved a few banknotes in the air and threw them into a basket. If they had no cash then the food in those bags was revealed. In one case the food was very much alive – a sheep joined the procession, decorated the aisle, was tied to a pillar, and reminded us of her presence by both sound and smell.

The same bishop Sengulane had already begun a 'Swords into Ploughshares' scheme, in which any surrendered weapons especially from former rebels were rewarded with farming equipment. This was a very wise move as they and those they had forced from or had escaped in terror from their former largely subsistence farms were able to return.

I went to Angola to meet a group which wanted a formal link with the Anglican Church. I stayed with and was taken around by the brother of the leader I was talking to. The brother was a junior government minister, something to do with youth, and he therefore had a car – with a smashed front window, bald tyres, and an AK47. My main memories are of the huge numbers of leg splints, the result of the thousands of landmines used in the internal conflict and the colourful children's clothes, dirty and torn but the only bright thing in a grey and litter-strewn city. As everywhere, the poor suffer the most, even if not directly involved. Faith is clearly important for individuals and communities, though, as the bishop in Mozambique pointed out, any future developments in the country would give alternatives to youths in particular, and communities would change.

Travels Overseas

Guyana

Arriving in Guyana presented an intriguing question - I heard one immigration officer say "Look out for two priests arriving tonight". I had a problem because church and state had fallen out; were the officers faithful Anglicans or government men? Thankfully by that time passports no longer had occupation listed so I just said I was visiting a friend and my passport was stamped.

In fact that was true, but getting to and from the missionary John Dorman was not easy. He had no connection with the rest of the world and no electricity or water. He went everywhere by canoe or on foot. The only way I could get to John was by persuading a pilot of one of the planes which supplied village shops and other local needs. This meant standing on a weighing machine; the flight price was decided by the loss of income from the goods which had to be taken off. I could not see any airstrip in the dense forest until we actually landed.

Within five minutes I was in a dugout canoe going upriver to an even more remote area. It was getting dark but we avoided hitting trees which had fallen and other dangers as the steersman could feel changes in the flow of water. One of the biggest dangers was cutting air supply to divers on the bottom of the river who were sucking up mud in the hope that they would find diamonds. The last hour was in total darkness with howler monkeys and other beasts screaming in what seemed only feet away.

Next morning I met one of the first indigenous Amerindian clergy supported by USPG but far more interesting was a local religious group which mixed an understanding of Christianity with their own tradition. Worship used only words believed to have been received from God in a trance; all were sung and danced. John was trying to get them accepted by the wider church, not helped by his racist bishop.

Getting back to Georgetown was a bit of a problem; no planes were coming because of fuel shortage. The only contact with the capital was through the clinic. They phoned and were asked if they could see a certain mountain; if so, it was safe to come as cloud would

not reach the airstrip before the plane. It arrived and unloaded down its rear ramp several huge needed oil drums. The plane did not appear to be stopping so all of us who wanted to get back to Georgetown rushed to the ramp and into the plane. About 15 got in before the ramp was raised and we then discovered most of the seats had been removed for the oil drums. It is the only flight I've been on with any straphangers!

Swaziland

There were no direct flights to Swaziland and I was banned from going to South Africa. I could change planes at long as I did not leave the airport but there was a delay in leaving the plane because a UK princess was leaving first to board a royal plane parked next door. I realised later she was one of many. When my plane landed in Swaziland it screeched to a halt and we were told that all non VIPs should get off into minibus beside the plane. We were taken to the visitors lounge and watched as the plane we had been removed from as non VIPs accelerated down the runway as if it had just landed.

The minor VIPs were taken away in posh cars and another plane was given more attention, security and its national anthem, then the whole place seemed to freeze. Hundreds of security guards awaited the arrival of Airforce One with the USA president's daughter. Several planes later they remembered that our luggage was still on our plane.

All the fuss was because that day a new king was being crowned. He was 18 and had been studying A levels at a UK public school. His actual ceremony was very traditional and private. Another tradition was to have a new wife every year and the church was later in turmoil as the 2nd chosen was the Archdeacon's daughter.

The public event was the following day at the national stadium. In those days there were not the present concerns over security so, with the missionary I had come to visit, I had a seat within 50 yards of all the international leaders we had seen arriving the previous day. Being Africa there were many singing groups welcoming the new president who then went around the stadium to wave to everyone. He and all his entourage were dressed in leopard skins as to kill one was a sign of manhood. We speculated how many were plastic.

This was followed by two things which made the crowd respond in totally different ways. The first was a mixture of bewilderment and joy at seeing it work out; this was a watered down version of what we know as the trooping of the colour. Every time a group reached a corner it seemed as if everyone was holding their breath and this was followed by a proud grin as it somehow worked itself out. The second was also a copy of a famous British military speciality; three propeller planes which someone said was the Swazi air force flew over trailing red, white and blue smoke as if they were the red arrows.

Lesotho

In Lesotho I had to visit a hospital in the centre of the country. I was given a choice of plane or Land Rover. I usually would have said the first, both to save time and for the view, but nowhere in Lesotho is less than 7000 feet and the hospital was much higher. I

had heard that planes need longer runways at higher altitude and that sometimes the plane had not taken off when it reached the runway end - it then went into a gorge and eventually gained enough power. I still do not know if this was true but I chose the car.

It was an unsurfaced road except for the top of some of the passes which had snow for much of the year. The first of these had the worrying title of 'God Help Me' but it had not worked for many, judging by the rusting smashed cars, lorries and even a bus down below. This was repeated at every pass and blind corner. The latter were the bigger threat to us as many local drivers asked for God's protection. They all prayed before starting a journey – this seemed to result in ignoring those blind corners. Presumably they would see this drivers of the rustling cars far below as people who had forgotten to pray.

The hospital had two Dutch doctors who were learning to use specialist motorbikes to get to people in the wild countryside with a few paths but no roads. But most arrived at the hospital on horseback, and many accidents were the result of riding. One such patient had a badly smashed leg. Down each side was a wooden plank. They were held together by at least six inch nails, also going through the leg itself. I understand he fully recovered.

Antigua

I tried to make my annual visit to the Province of the West Indies coincide with some gathering of church leaders to avoid spending time travelling around. In Antigua there was to be the consecration of a new archbishop. I contacted Lambeth Palace to see if they were sending anyone but this was not policy as there were too many such occasions and to choose one over another would cause rifts in Anglicanism worldwide. I suggested a letter which I could present but the Archbishop-to-be decided I should read it at the service. I did as he asked and was seen to do it by the whole island on TV. The following day people were genuflecting to the new 'Archbishop of Canterbury' as I walked around.

Belize

I had visited Belize several times for work and suggested it for honeymoon. One place I wanted her to see was difficult to access and I had crossed it off my list but, because we knew I would be recognised, we decided to call on the Bishop. He gave us a Land Rover for all of our two weeks. A first adventure had to be the howler monkey project we would have missed. In return for local farmers leaving edges of land uncropped - a version of our set-aside - all visitors had to be guided by locals. We got within a few yards of howlers but it was other details that were fascinating. Ants played a large part including one which he demonstrated on his shirt but which had been used to join sides of a cut; an ant was held over the cut and his pincers made a hole in each side. In many cases he was broken off so just pincers remained.

Grenada

A missionary was on a small island close to Grenada. I got a small ferry to visit. This had a ramp to get cars on and off. There was little wind that day so the ramp was left down. I

got on to take some photos. While there I was aware of a small brush of air close to my face then I noticed all the other passengers. Some were just gasping, others were coming towards me with anxious looks. Then I noticed a thick cable close to my feet. It was one of two holding the ramp. It had broken and just missed my face.

Once on the island I saw outstanding facilities in a small fishing port. Apparently the islanders had a tradition of catching one whale each year and, to ensure getting their vote, the Japanese gave loads of unneeded aid. The church had a unique sign which I copied and had on my door at USPG. The church was on a narrow road close to the sea and there was a one way system but on the 'No Entry' sign was written 'Except for Religious Processions'.

The Bahamas

The bishop there competed with one in Brazil for being the fattest in the Anglican Church. On my one visit I wanted to see a variety of parishes so I was sent to Long Island. It was aptly named and very narrow. The priest I stayed with drove me to the north on the only road and I noticed a small plane which had crashed near the road. The priest then pointed out the masts by the side of the road; these were not the lampposts I had assumed but to prevent drug-carrying planes from using it to transfer to a speedboat. It was just thirty minutes from the USA - all the time the Americans had to notice and arrest. He then pointed out a huge balloon on the next island and said "If you get out and approach the plane you will be spotted and within ten minutes a helicopter will be overhead". He was wrong - it was eight.

That evening two men appeared at the priest's door. They talked for over an hour. When they left he came back to me laughing his head off. The two had left his church to form their own but had come to blows over one sermon in which one had said a quoted psalm was not written by David. They wanted a judgement which the priest refused. He told me that the dispute was really about the ten percent offering and two churches would result giving them each their ten percent.

Costa Rica

Gaby and I were walking in a nature reserve; suddenly came twenty squawking scarlet macaws which settled in a tree above our heads - Gaby was converted to bird watching! Going down a river our guide got out of the boat onto the sand with half a dead chicken and immediately there appeared an enormous crocodile, just feet away. Judging by its size this happened regularly. Going back upstream we had a setting sun behind us and black clouds over mountains in front. Suddenly a flock of both macaws and scarlet ibis flew across the dark sky lit by the setting sun. We were so enthralled by the two bird sightings that we forgot to take photos but there are several of the fat crocodile.

Chapter 6: Sermons

Real Sermons – Philip's introduction

The whole exercise of writing ‘When you are Dying’ began by thinking through what had been important to me in sermons. I have always used the challenge of preaching as an opportunity to explore and connect the given Bible readings with whatever was going on in the world or local community at the time.

Several of the chapters in the book are in one sense a development from that, though not limited by the week’s selection from scripture or by the ten minute time restriction if they had been spoken aloud.

All but one of the sermons reproduced here were given at St. John’s Church in Peckham in south-east London. The congregation was 90% black, mostly of West African origin, but with an important faithful West Indian minority.

I have chosen four: the first on one of the important themes throughout the book – Principles or Rules [chapter 7], another which is available as chapter to download – Peace. Then there are two that related to specific issues, each reinforced by stories of black role models, which I felt to be important when preaching to that group. The first is one I enjoyed giving in 2007 at the time of the 200th anniversary of the end of the transatlantic slave trade. The enjoyment was partly because it related especially to the minority Caribbean group in the congregation, but also because a historic local black figure had emerged, who had important things to say to all historic groups – sellers, buyers and victims. In the other, on Christian Commitment and dating from 2006, I was able to use the story of the first known black Anglican ‘martyr’ in Africa – a man convinced of Christian ‘Principles’, whose hope for salvation was certain for him but far from selfish.

Sermon 1 – Principles or Rules

(Sermon given on 5th Sunday in Lent centred on the reading John 12, 20-32).

One Sunday recently when I wasn’t able to be here, I was manning a stall at Olympia in an event called ‘One Life’. Sounds like it should be a Christian event, doesn’t it - ‘One Life’ - but it wasn’t. It was for people who wanted to see what they could make of their lives. So there was everything from where to buy the perfect house, how to improve your health, how to find the perfect career, find the perfect holiday, how to invest your money, how to learn what you might be good at, and above all, find what might satisfy you. That was what ‘One Life’ was about. Life in that sense was almost entirely selfish. But in one corner there were tables put up by a number of charities. The people I work for, Christians Abroad, could just about afford to rent a space about half the size of this altar. We and the other charities wanted people to see that there was more to life than just what we might want for ourselves. The ‘One life’ we each have must include others.

People were there with different motives, of course. We hoped some would begin to see things our way, to see that serving others was another possibility, to see another view of the world, to see that life could be different, to look outside themselves. And of course, until we started talking with them we had no idea where in their minds they were coming from.

When I saw what the gospel reading was today that weekend suddenly came flooding back. As at that exhibition, to ‘see’ something meant lots of different things to different

people - so what was the starting point for those people in the gospel who were wanting to 'see' Jesus? What was their take on things - what did 'one life' mean for them?

In the story some Greeks come to Jerusalem to worship. We don't know who they are, but they are allowed into the Temple area where Jesus is, so they have to be people who are connected to the Jewish faith, people we call proselytes, foreign converts. And people looking for a new life have to start, as we all do, from where they are, so being Greek they grab the disciple with the very common Greek name of Philip. Maybe they think he'll be sympathetic. And Philip grabs Andrew, the only other disciple with a Greek name - and they go together to tell Jesus that they have met some people who wish to see him.

You have to hand it to St John, of course, because he arranges the story so cleverly. Then as now, to see something can mean any number of things. It could be, as in English today, just to look. "We want to see Jesus, have a look at him, see what this man we've heard about really looks like. Never met a prophet before. Does he really have that funny accent from Galilee?" There were people like that at the 'One Life' event too - that's why the charity stall next to ours attracted people - it was about saving orang-utans and had cuddly toys for sale.

Or it could be something more - a conversation, at least. When the headmaster, the boss, the foreman, the chief clerk wants to see you, that may be threatening, but "I've called to see you", may equally be a welcome visit. Maybe that's what they want. "Went to see this interesting man in the Temple the other day, wanted to ask him some questions, but all he did was preach at us - he was going on about bits of seed falling on the ground. Said I had to hate myself. Didn't do anything for me". Was that their reaction? Were they interested in what they might get out of it? Something for themselves? Those kind of people flocked to that One Life exhibition.

And seemingly devout Christians can be the same - what do we want out of it? Eternal Life? Certainty that we are right? Confirmation that our life in the next world will be perfect, even if this one isn't? A way forward? Salvation? How selfish are we? How different are we from those who flocked to that exhibition?

At that place there were some who had other hopes about 'seeing' something. Now I see, now I understand, now I've got it. Now I know what it's all about. Maybe that's what those Greek men wanted. We don't know. They are like the fall guy for the stand-up comic. They've set the whole thing up, but they aren't the star of the show. We hear nothing more about them. Like many other bits in John's version of the good news about Jesus Christ, it's really just a way in to say something important and true for every Christian - so we can see something about real life. Jesus will draw all people to himself. Greek or Jew, Samaritan or Roman, whoever was there, whoever is trying to see Jesus today, all are included in the message, he is acting on behalf of us all.

So what does Jesus say? After all, he has the 'one life' that made a real difference to the world. We learn of it here, as we often do, when he compares his own life with the life others then knew - the everyday life of eking out their own existence from the land. We heard him today: "In truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it does it yields a rich harvest. The man who loves

himself is lost, but he who hates himself in this life will be kept safe for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me”.

And if ‘seeing’ has a multitude of meanings, so does that dying of a grain of wheat. Above all, it’s true in the physical sense - the grain no longer exists, it stops being a seed, but it does that for one reason - to continue the life of the species. And what is true of just a seed is even more true of the person who tells the story - he has come to continue the life of God’s people. But he must die too if that one life is to change the world for ever.

But then is the nasty bit. The same applies to his disciples. They then and we now, can only pass to our new life if the same applies, if we share in that death and therefore in that new life.

But how can we do that? Can we seriously suggest that the only way that we’re going to get anywhere in another life is by becoming a martyr in this one? Is that what hating your life means? That would be a much too simple and literal understanding of Jesus’ words “If anyone serves me, he must follow me” - because we aren’t able to earn our way to that life by martyrdom, by sacrifice, by giving everything up. Those things may help us to be better people, closer to the spirit of Christ’s lifestyle, but of themselves they don’t achieve anything. The simple point is that Jesus has done all that needs to be done, and we can’t add a thing to it that hasn’t been achieved already. And if we think differently, then we’re as lost as those Greeks or the trendy people attending that exhibition.

Of course, sometimes Christians do become martyrs - but not because they intend or want to imitate Jesus’ death - rather they find themselves at a point where because of their action others want their death. Jesus doesn’t - he doesn’t want copycats - there’s no point. We can never do enough. The ‘earning’ has already been done. The man who loved his life the least, like the solitary grain, achieved the most. It’s happened, it’s been done, we can’t add anything to it.

Jesus underlines that by saying if we love ourselves, if we think only of our own future whether in physical terms or even aiming for salvation, we are lost. Sounds hard, we have to hate ourselves.

Sounds bad, sounds very unlike Jesus - we have to hate ourselves. But maybe that hymn we sang the other week will help us to understand:

*“My God, I love thee, not because I hope for heaven thereby
Nor yet because who love thee not are lost eternally.
Thou O my Jesu, thou didst me upon the cross embrace”*

The hardest thing for us to take is that we are not going to earn our way into salvation by doing any of those things. But completely swamping that thought is the knowledge that we were loved and are still loved in the most extraordinary way. The passage for the Gospel ended today, “When I am lifted up, I shall draw all people to myself”. It is what we often call the ‘victory of the cross’. Because of that we are drawn to him and as that happens to us we feel we need to respond - even in some way to that appeal to die like a grain of wheat. First, our pride’s got to go, along with any assumption that we can achieve anything in comparison with what Jesus has already done - but there must be something else. All of us, of course must try to be unselfish, and yes we must care about others, in this parish yes we must get into all the things the social justice team and the

pastoral team are encouraging us to get involved in. That service is an important proof of our real response to that love we have been given - but even that may be not as dramatic as our pride would want it to be. A priest in prison in South Africa many years ago, himself abused and living in appalling conditions wrote "The symbol of love is the cross... which we make of silver and gold and talk so glibly about 'Taking up' and which we hang round our necks... I wish Christians would today hang a model of a bedpan round their necks and in their houses. It would convey the menial, smelly undramatic service which loves, (the cross) so often demands".

Not now, one day we shall understand it all - we will have all we need, our own lives will have a reason - but that will be simply because that one life up there has already done everything that is needed. The victory has been won and the only thing we can add is a heart full of thankful love and service to others. And that can be good and it can be fun - even Jesus had a good time loving others - remember those stories of partying and drinking with sinners.

That same hymn I quoted before finishes like this, put into a bit more modern English:

*Not with the hope of gaining anything,
but as you have loved me, Oh ever-loving Lord,
so I love you and will love you more and will sing your praise
but only because you are my God and everlasting King
Amen*

Sermon 2: Peace

(Preached in September 2006)

One of the hardest things to come to terms with in what's happening in the world at the moment is the place of religion in it all. It seems to be close to the centre of every world mess we can think of. In Uganda the 'Lord's Resistance Army', led by a so-called prophet, has been abducting and training children often under ten years old to indoctrinate as rebels fighters - hopefully now the cease-fire there will work; in Sri Lanka the civil war is between groups who are Hindu and Buddhist as well as tribally different; closer to home, Northern Ireland is still divided even within Christianity; and most in the news now in the Middle East, the people of the Lebanon are caught between Muslim and Jewish fanatics and politicians, one side supported in part by Christians who believe that Jesus will come again when Israel has acquired again all the so-called promised land for itself once again, the other supported by people who believe the prophet Mohammed encourages them to violence and martyrdom for his sake. Jerusalem, the Holy city of Christianity and Judaism and Islam, is torn apart it seems by members of those three religious groups. Yet all proclaim peace. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you", says Jesus; "Nation will not lift sword against nation", "I will send peace flowing like a river" says Yahweh through Isaiah to the Jewish people; And, "the servants of the God of Mercy are they who walk upon the Earth softly; and when the ignorant address them, they reply, Peace!" are words from the Koran, the holy book of Islam.

All proclaim peace, yet God somehow gets drawn into whichever side you are on. God demands action, God is our inspiration, God demands restitution, God has been insulted:

all reasons we hear - and this version of God will somehow reward those who die for his cause - justification for apparently destroying livelihoods, killing and maiming those who had nothing at all to do with whatever was said or done. What is it about religion that makes people make these claims; that makes people call upon their version of God to do all that when all proclaim that peace? We can say that we distort our religion - all of us, of whatever group we belong to - but why do we do it like that?

I don't claim even for one second that I know the answer to that - except to say that as in the Gospel we've just heard, we are all fairly guilty of most of the sins Jesus spoke of. I recognised many if not most of the twelve that Jesus listed - pride, avarice, greed, arrogance, envy. Perhaps you had a better count. Even in those where I reckoned I was innocent, there are questions. True I haven't committed actual personal murder, but have I worked to stop it happening on a world scale - something we shall hear about next week when our guest speaker talks about the causes of poverty - itself the cause of more death than anything else? Have any of us worked to prevent that? Maybe we're not burglars, but by unfair trade have we joined in the theft of the basic things of life that others need.

Are we even guilty of greed and avarice or even murder as people die of preventable diseases and malnutrition? A bit dramatic, but all things on Jesus' list.

We are all part of that and we're all involved in the cause of the conflicts that seem to fill our news. Politically and financially we want to protect our own interests. And perhaps at the centre of that for Christians is the way we can ignore what is behind the message Jesus leaves with us that he took himself from his Jewish heritage. 'Shalom' - the Hebrew word translated usually as 'Peace', really means something far bigger: wholeness, a state of well-being, not just the lack of war or conflict between nations or groups or even in families. Peace is more than not being at war - it is shalom, being whole, in relationship, united, thinking of others before ourselves, caring. The whole life of Jesus is encircled by this theme - from the announcement by angels of his birth as a time of peace on earth, to his own words "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" at the end of his life. And when he sent out his disciples on their first missionary journeys, he said "Let your first words be 'Peace to this house'". When he met them after his resurrection, when they were hiding behind locked doors, afraid of violence from the Jews, his own first words were "Peace be with you". When we share the peace as we shall later on we are doing far more than saying we are not at war, we are saying we are trying to relate in the way that Jesus wants.

Our second reading today underlined all that. It came from the Epistle of James, one of the least quoted and least used bits of the New Testament because it's not concerned with the niceties of doctrine, but with life. As one Bible Study writer says "No book can rival James for its no nonsense approach to living out the gospel of Christ". In the lesson today James says: "Every generous act of giving ... is from above ... Your anger does not produce God's righteousness ... Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world".

The wider peace he speaks of is something to which the majority of people of all denominations and all faiths are theoretically committed but are all equally blind. One of the five pillars of Islam says you must give to the poor; Judaism and Islam both say you

shouldn't charge interest on loans; Hinduism says you must even thank the beggar for the privilege of being able to help and therefore to earn respect from God. The peace Jesus speaks of is peace with justice and there will be no peace as long as injustice remains. In the early years of the church Jews and Gentiles together as new Christians tried to live that out - they formed a new community of believers. It's all there in the New Testament - a new community, in which all were equal, however they started. It survived for a short while despite everyone having to do the hardest thing - give up the power one group had over another. Peace came with justice, but it seems that was something they couldn't hold on to and that early Christian experiment in equality and community failed. As the Acts of the Apostles says "they were all held in high esteem; for they had never a needy person among them". All the sharing soon stopped and the divisions began again. They couldn't handle it.

A bit later, both Islam and Sikhism - two of the other great religions of the world - tried the same. Each had in their beginnings a seeking for peace with justice - Sikhism to end the quarrels between Hindu and Islam. Like Christians they soon failed and like Christians they still fail, but all have at their heart an ideal of a peace in which all will serve God and each other - love God and love neighbour - peace and justice.

Today all that is more important than ever in what we call our global village - a world which is shrinking in terms of transport and trade and particularly in the ease of communicating across the globe. Odd though it seems, the sudden shrinking of the world in the last few decades has highlighted our differences because we are all so much more aware of each other. As our differences and the extremes of poverty and wealth become more obvious, so it seems we get more insecure and make more demands for ourselves. The answers aren't always easy either. One question around at the moment is about more faith-based schools. Shouldn't other faiths be allowed to have as many of them as churches have? But will that increase divisions and differences rather than solve them? Will having education linked to faith create more or less conflict? Will peace, shalom, be top of the curriculum?

Stating the problem is always easier than solving it - so where do we go from here? More arrests yesterday for terror suspects doesn't help. First thing, all faiths need to listen to their founders - because often we are selective in what bits we choose to listen to. So what did Jesus say on all this?

Jesus knew that the only way to stop the cycle of hatred and revenge, which from family fights to international war spirals until it bursts into anger and conflict and violence and death was to do what he did. "Turn the other cheek", he said. Not easy when you're a victim.

Whoever loses, whether a battle or war itself, is put into a position of needing to answer back, to get revenge. We have to get out of that spiral too. "Love your enemies" said Jesus.

Putting people under threat, making them feel frightened, does not stop people or cower them into submission - it fuels the recruitment campaigns of the people you are fighting, and it feeds their stories and their propaganda for the next time. "Do good to those who hate you", said Jesus, "Bless those who curse you". Not easy either.

Calling people names, designating them rather than the acts they commit as evil, suggesting one side has moral superiority does no good either. "Pass no judgement, and you will not be judged", said Jesus, "Do not condemn and you will not be condemned".

To do all that is the biggest challenge we have - whichever faith we hold. As a spokesperson from Christian Aid said: "Our challenge is not that of convincing others that our way of life, our religion, our way of governing is better or closer to Truth and human dignity (than theirs). It is to be honest about (what's wrong) in our own house and invite others to do the same". Or, as Jesus said "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye, with never a thought for the great plank in your own".

We say a confession at the beginning of each service here -how many of us think of it in that way - not just the few naughty things we did last week, but the great plank in our eyes. If you do nothing else today, go home and read St Luke chapter six where Jesus talks to his disciples: love your enemies, treat others as you would like them to treat you, remember that even sinners love those who love them, pass no judgement and you will not be judged, like a good tree a good person produces good from a store of good within them, build your house on firm foundations. All familiar stuff, but if we applied it to the world as well as our families and friends, what a difference that would make. Understanding our faith-founder is stage one.

But speaking and pronouncing on all that doesn't make me feel any better or any less guilty - so, we need stage two - some inspiration; people who are doing it. In Israel and Palestine today there is a group called the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme. The members come from all over the world and are Christians who stand alongside both Jews and Muslims who are trying to sort out the mess. They accompany people through checkpoints to see they are treated fairly; they live with those under threat of intimidation and violence, stand with those trying to reconcile people. There are Christian women working in Muslim schools, linked to Jewish women who have formed a group watching the places of most danger and conflict. The camera and the word are their weapons.

There are also people of all faiths who refuse to fight; people who want to de-militarize both sides, turn the fight for land into living as neighbours. One of them, Racheli Merhav, a Jewish mother, said this: "It's child abuse, sending our soldiers to do what they are doing" - even the schoolbooks for small children, she says, use military words. When her own child of 16 began to prepare to be part of an elite combat unit, she said "I had to do something". "We need good neighbours. Frustrated, angry, hungry - that's the worst neighbour to have ... we need healthy, happy neighbours. We benefit from that".

An encouraging story to end on - someone not afraid to do her bit. I wish I had the courage too. It's so much easier to just speak about it in a sermon. But perhaps like her we can start where we are at a local level, with neighbours of another faith we ignore, people we wouldn't normally sit next to on a bus, shops we would avoid. And as well: the way we vote, fair trade not just at the back of church on Sunday, pastoral care of each other. And in our prayers too. In prayers let's remember that Jewish mother Racheli, and all those like her of every faith who see that the aims of their founders are more important than the divisions promoted by their followers; let's pray that we can share a true peace of action rather than just words. The Jesus' words will be known to us: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you".

Sermon 3: Slavery

Today, this actual day, 200 years ago, the British Parliament passed a law prohibiting the transatlantic slave trade. Around the same time a factory worker in England wrote this:

*How comes it that ye toil and sweat
And bear the oppressor's rod
For cruel man, who dares to change
the equal laws of God.
How come that man with tyrant heart
Is cause to rule another,
To rob, oppress, and leech-like, suck
The life's blood of a brother?*

He felt he was ruled and owned in some way, and maybe saw himself to be not much different from a slave.

Christian Aid gives us a current example - 2.45 million people are victims of what we now call 'people trafficking' each year, half of them are children, sexual exploitation is part of 87% of those cases. As a Christian group they are highlighting and fighting that.

Abuse of people existed here too and still exists - young women particularly from Eastern Europe are still trafficked here. But there is something about the transatlantic slave trade of 200 years ago that made it worse than anything else that was being done to or perhaps ever had been done to any group of people. So its ending was a special landmark. People were objects of trade, sold, moved from one continent to another and sold again, denied their families, their language, and their religion, as well as their freedom. They were stripped of everything, though we know that secretly many things of culture and faith were kept alive. But the distances were huge and its methods so evil. That hit me the other day as I read what was admittedly a novel, but describing the meeting of two ships at sea, long after the slave trade was supposed to have ended, but when people were still as now evading the law.

The sea brought to their nostrils a stench so nauseating that it could not be ignored. Moments later they glimpsed the silhouette of a ship in the distance. The captain got his spyglass to confirm what he already knew: It was a slave ship. The captives were stacked like firewood, one atop another, bound with chains and covered in their own excrement and vomit, healthy mixed with sick, dying and dead. Half of them died at sea, but when they arrived in port the traders 'fattened' the survivors, and their sales compensated for their losses; only the strongest reached their destiny or sold at a good price.

'We have to help those poor people', exclaimed a passenger. The captain replied: 'The traffic is illegal and that cargo is contraband. If we approach, they will throw them overboard so they sink to the bottom with the weight of the chains. And even if we could free them, they have no place to go. They were captured in their own country by African traffickers. They sell their own people.'

Today we are celebrating 200 years since the end of that trade. It changed human history and in a strange way we as a congregation are who we are in part because of that trade.

The mix of people we are has a lot to do with the colonisation of Africa and the Caribbean that created connections for us all. That colonisation and capture of people's lands and the mission work of churches that often encouraged it affected my family too. My grandfather was in the British army in India, my father was born there and also spent more than half his adult life there, my son was born in Africa. Some of you have closer connections, often because of the shortage of workers in this country made the descendants of slaves taken to the Caribbean from Africa to move yet again. That story's been well told, not least by Andrea Levy, whose parents came here from Jamaica, in her prize-winning book 'Small Island'. Some of you or your families came for asylum and sanctuary from rulers whose own principles were as evil perhaps as those who sold and bought slaves in previous times. Our health service, from doctors to nurses and all the other staff, our transport system would have collapsed without that movement of people.

Those changes were partly economic and partly political, but three Saturdays ago some of us were privileged to be part of the Life-long learning day when we learned about 'black theology' - how God is revealed to people whatever circumstances and culture we have as our origin. And just as our thinking about God today is often inspired by leaders from around the world - the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Zimbabwe in the news at the moment for standing up for freedom there - so people from those black communities 200 hundred years ago also inspired the movement to end slavery, both by showing ignorant people here they were not like the picture that was painted of them, but also challenging us, as thinkers from around the world still do, to consider what God wants for us all.

One such man was Ignatius Sancho, incredibly surviving his birth nearly three hundred years ago on one of those slave ships crossing the Atlantic from Africa to the West Indies. His owner then moved back here and brought his mother with him. So his earliest memories were of just down the road from here in Greenwich where he was a child slave. He obviously did well, he persuaded his owners to use him as their butler, he was given his freedom and he retired to run a grocery shop in Westminster. He composed music, appeared on the stage, and entertained many famous figures of literary and artistic London. He became the first African we know of to vote in a British election. He was thought of in his age as "the extraordinary Negro", and to eighteenth-century British opponents of the slave trade he became a symbol of the humanity of Africans, an example of how things could be. There was a need to challenge the racism as well as the injustice.

Even writing itself was unusual then, long before there were schools here for everyone and most so-called British people couldn't read or write, but that man, Ignatius Sancho, wrote this in the old-fashioned language of that time:

The practice of your country (which as a resident I love for its freedom and for the many blessings I enjoy) I am sorry to observe has been uniformly wicked in the West Indies - and even on the coast of Guinea. The grand object of English navigators - indeed of all Christian navigators - is money - money - money.... Commerce was meant by the goodness of the Deity to share the various goods of the earth into every part - to unite mankind in the blessed chains of brotherly love, society and mutual dependence. The enlightened Christian should spread the riches of the Gospel of peace (as well as) the commodities of his respective land. Commerce mixed with strict honesty, and with Religion for its companion, would be a blessing to every shore it touched at. In Africa,

the poor wretched natives, blessed with the most fertile and luxuriant soil, are rendered so much the more miserable for what Providence meant as a blessing. The horrid cruelty and treachery of the petty Kings in Africa is encouraged by their Christian customers, and to enflame this tribal conflict and madness they bring them strong liquors and powder and bad fire-arms to furnish them with the hellish means of killing and kidnapping. While we should condemn those who sell we need to remember this is made worse by their Christian visitors, by the Christians' abominable traffic for slaves.

To the shame of this country even our churches owned slaves and were later financially compensated for them by government, when once slavery itself finally ended in British territories some twenty-six years on . That's why yesterday six of us from this parish went to repent and give thanks at that march through London, for the part that William Wilberforce and other Christians played in the movement that began the end of that particularly humiliating and often deadly trade.

But the amazing and to many of us the really incredible thing about all this is that somehow those who are exploited did not deny that God of the person who abused them or believe that their own God has abandoned them. They see the way out as not only understanding God themselves but also trying to teach it to those who have ignored the truth.

A writer from India, where jobs, permitted relationships and even worship is divided by the traditional caste system said by some to be not unlike a system of slavery, has said that our spiritual history begins with the story of slavery in the book of Exodus. Slavery then and now, he suggests is the ultimate example of how we ignore God's will. It is the bringing together of all that is wrong, every way that we disobey our God. We can only be liberated when we understand what God is about, what God expects and what God wants - and from that understanding we have a right to develop a relationship.

To take that story of the end of one bit of slavery in the Bible isn't simple unless we do it with the same cultural understanding we expect of people today. It gets easy to word-pick and verse-pick from the bible to prove almost anything, and what that proves above all is that we learnt slowly, and still learn slowly.

The way things develop is always more important than individual verses which always have a historical context. Much more important is the story of the way we learn more about what God wants of us, and how with that guidance, we can change things. And that happened in that same book of Exodus, the story of Israel's own escape from its slavery. In captivity they'd become so numerous they were a threat, so the Egyptians wanted to restrict them. They gave instructions to midwives to kill Hebrew children, they set task masters over them to work them harder, and they tried to restrict their free time, including their time to worship their God. Worship was seen as laziness. They are idle, they said, they want time off work, therefore they cry 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to God'. But in a lesson for us all, the enslaved refused to be beaten and the owners had to give in. The Egyptian leader Pharaoh eventually says 'Go, you can sacrifice to your God within the land'. But Moses says they need to go into the wilderness to do that - and they are allowed. Then they argue about who can worship. Pharaoh says leave the women and children, Moses and Aaron say no. They win the fight even to take their cattle with them. The slaves refuse every offer made by the oppressor, the dialogue breaks down, the

confrontation increases and as we know and celebrate at Passover in a few weeks time eventually they escape and a new period of history begins for us all - because it is only then, when people have fought for their freedom which includes recognising and worshipping God as the creator and maker of everyone in his own image - only then does God make a covenant with them.

So a group of slaves, powerless bonded labourers, are not only rescued because of their faith, but are then called as God's chosen people to be at the centre of God's relationship with the human race. It's something we are still learning, but it's not easy.

Sadly, those who learn God's will at one point in their history don't always carry it forward. The treatment of Palestinians by a basically Jewish state of Israel seems to reverse much of what they learned of God as slaves. Christians need to learn from that too and the lesson is that it is still in confronting those we see as opposed to God's will that makes us think through and understand better what God really wants of us. Even Jesus himself says his most important things when challenged and made to stand up for what is right. Think of the crucifixion for which this Lent is preparing us to put at the centre of our lives at Easter. It is the threat of that dreadful end to his life that makes Jesus even more determined to do his Father's will, and both a criminal crucified alongside him and the soldier at the bottom of the cross acknowledge the significance of this abused and maltreated person who had unbelievably forgiven those at whose hands he was about to die.

It's our job now to continue that, to stand up for what is right, perhaps to suffer as a result and perhaps through that to find out what is really inside us. In that way we will understand what God wants and we will take our part in leading change in our own world. We are still involved in slavery, for example, perhaps unknowingly, when we buy cheaply in the shops - and our Fair trade stall is another way many Christians and others are fighting back, demanding proper salaries and rights for workers.

That former slave from just down the road gives us some good guidance on that. All those years ago he said: 'Wherever you live, study human nature. Whatever their religion or their complexion, study their hearts. With simplicity, kindness, and charity as your tools then everyone will respect you - and God will bless you'.

Sermon 4: Christian Commitment

This evening people from this parish will be confirmed. They've had a couple of months of weekly classes and then yesterday a whole day of preparation. Tonight they will confirm the faith that their parents and godparents stated for them. They will make a public stand, if you like, for what they believe. Those of us who've been with them in a few of the classes have ourselves been privileged to be part of their journey, and from me at least, to them I want to say a big thank you for all I've learned from you, all that comes from your faithful bible reading and deep prayer at home and the sharing of your thoughts and wisdom in the classes.

I have to confess that I always go into classes like that with loads of questions - and not to test people or catch them out. Instead of answers I always come away with new ideas and my own faith stretched, and sometimes my lack of faith challenged and put right. So

thank you to the candidates that I met with a few times, for your willingness to share with each other and for the commitment you are to be confirming.

The gospel we just heard was a very appropriate message for today too - about how our commitment is acknowledged and confirmed - but I'll come back to that in a minute. First a memory of another commitment that is celebrated every year on June 18th - yesterday, in fact, the same day you the candidates were putting it all together in that last preparation day.

Yesterday was the feast of Bernard Mizeki - the first African member of our Anglican church known to have been killed for his faith - the first African Anglican martyr.

He was born in what is now Mozambique around 165 years ago, (no-one's sure exactly) but somehow by the time he was twelve-ish he was a thousand miles away already working as a labourer in the slums of Cape Town, in South Africa. He was a little different it seems from most of his mates - at night he went to classes at an Anglican school. He was baptized when he was around fifteen and managed to learn English, French and Dutch as well as eight African languages. He helped translate the Bible into some of those languages, and when his bishop wanted to evangelise what is now Mashonaland in Zimbabwe, he was the obvious companion. Once there and around the age of thirty, he was given the task of setting up a new mission station. He grew his own food, he learned the local language, he started a school, married the daughter of the local chief. He encouraged people by example as well as preaching - and in contrast to many European missionaries, who saw only ignorance and evil, he began where people were in the faith that they had. Instead of denying any truth at all in African traditional religions he recognised all the good things there were - particularly the understanding that there is but one God - and built onto that the new dimension of Jesus.

Numbers grew, but he upset local leaders, who saw people's loyalty going elsewhere. On top of that, the behaviour of white settlers was provoking people - so it was easy to see him as a tool of colonialism for bringing the white man's religion that came with occupation. He was warned to leave, but he refused to desert his converts - and on June 18th 1896 he was speared to death outside his house. It is said that a blinding light was seen and a rushing wind was heard - and his body disappeared. Every year, yesterday, June 18th, in Zimbabwe, a great festival takes place at that spot.

He was the first, but there have been many African martyrs since then of course - including perhaps the best known in 1977, Archbishop Luwum of Uganda.

We don't expect our commitment to be tested in that way; its not exactly at the top of the list for what we expect - but the commitment that drove Bernard Mizeki is the key to our Christian lives - and our Gospel reading today helps us to understand how we should deal with it, how to cope with today's demands - it's is both one of the hardest parts of Jesus' teaching but also one of the most comforting.

The hard part is the division that faith sometimes causes - as it did in the community that Bernard Mizeki served. 'I came to set sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers ... A man's worst enemies will be the members of his own family. Whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not fit to be my disciple'. Hard words, difficult ideas for us today, in a world in which we try to be tolerant, we try hard to

understand what drives people, what's happened to make them who they are. Nowadays we are told that confrontation doesn't work - reconciliation and understanding and service as the ways we change people's minds. But Jesus says 'Whoever does not take up his cross and follow in my steps is not fit to be my disciple' - not because Jesus is full of his own self-importance or wanting to be followed slavishly like some of the modern religious sect leaders seem to want. The clue is in the last verse we heard today in the Gospel 'Whoever tries to gain his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it'. The following of Jesus may cause upset and division, especially with those who are still self-seeking, but that is not the intention. The intention is to create a people, a 'church' as it soon became known, that is made up of true and committed disciples.

And as always, we are not left alone. Despite the hard language there are words of comfort. Maybe we are being sent out, as Jesus says a bit earlier in the same Gospel, 'like sheep among wolves' but we are not to be afraid. In the passage we heard today, we were told of three things that will help us, three things we will receive, whether we are new or old in our faith and membership and commitment.

First, Jesus says, do not be afraid of other people - they have no real power over what happens to us eternally. Only one person has that power, and it is not determined by our friends, enemies, family or anyone else.

Second, he says, remember that God has taken notice of our lives, we are known, each of us, by God. Even sparrows, then the cheapest food around, are in the keeping of God, have their lives known to God, and not one falls to the ground without his consent. How much more are we worth, we who are made in the image of God, created to do his work, to share in the ministry of his own human son.

And third, and perhaps the most comforting 'If anyone declares publically that he belongs to me, I will do the same for him (or her, of course) before my father in heaven' - it is as if when we say our creed in a few moments we are having Jesus say to the Father: 'Listen, hear them, those are my followers, they are in our safe-keeping'.

So, apart from the things we do in private - our prayer and our Bible reading - and coming here on a Sunday and perhaps a few other times during the week, what is it that identifies us as his followers? How do we, in the words of Jesus, 'declare publically' that we belong to him, so that Jesus will declare for us before his Father? In other words, where is our commitment? One thing we certainly cannot say since Fr Toby has been here is that we haven't been given the choice or the opportunity. The five parish teams are a good start - pastoral, education and spirituality, social justice, finance and building - each of them not only people with ideas and plans, but if you're not one of that kind, also people who will carry out what the parish needs. Visiting the sick, welcoming newcomers, committing in stewardship, keeping the place in good repair, exploring our faith in groups, using the Bible study notes Linda distributes, making changes locally and in the wider world through social justice and the sharing of our parish resources - and that's just a start. The commitment is for all of us, to learn to develop, to share and to put into practice.

Bernard Mizeki is a shining example, but God does not ask us to do anything that he has not given us the gifts to do. So let's use the gifts we all have, all different, but all from the

same source so no single one greater than any other. Let's not disappoint the confirmation candidates, let's support them, not leave them alone in their commitment. Lets give them the opportunity to join us in our commitment, because, as Jesus said in the Gospel we heard: 'If anyone declares publically that he belongs to me, I will, do the same for him before my Father in heaven'. What more do we need?

The fifth sermon – Gaby's introduction

Only about five months before Philip died, when operating the computer was already extremely slow, Bill Cave, a good friend who is a Prison Chaplain, invited Philip to write the sermon for Easter Sunday for Bill to read during the service. Philip rose immediately to the challenge, though it took him about a month to write. He quotes from the sermon in 'Hope', the last chapter of the book, but here it is available in full.

Easter Sermon

Eyes are important for me. The disease I have gradually stops muscles from working. I am paralysed from the neck down, cannot speak and have all my food directly into my stomach through a tube. I can write this sermon only by using my eyes on a special computer. I have to look at a letter on a keyboard which is on the screen. But more problems! My eyelid muscles are getting weaker and I cannot close or open my eyes, so at night I have to wear an eye mask so that I can sleep. This very personal story is not to gain sympathy but, on this important day, to make us consider that 'to see' has a very different meaning for each of us. For me, 'seeing' is an important physical issue – for me, not to see means the end of all communication - but for most of you that won't be true. Seeing is not just about using eyes.

I heard a story the other day which made me think again about 'seeing'. It was about a girl who was born blind. Some years later, doctors managed to get her to see for the first time. She was used to identifying things by using her ears, nose and hands. She heard things no-one else seemed to hear; her nose smelt things well before others; but the thing which gave her most problems was touch. She was used to identifying things by how they felt. In her garden, if she couldn't see what something was by smell, she touched the leaves and knew instantly what it was. People didn't believe her when she said she chose what to wear by touching. It was confusing when suddenly she could see – it was as if two parts of her brain were saying opposite things. She wanted to continue to enjoy her old world.

What has all this to do with Easter? Like that girl who saw things in a different way, for most of us 'to see' means 'to understand'. She understood things from the perspective of her particular life and we are just the same. It depends where we start or come from. And none of us are perfect – even Jesus' disciples.

If you were a disciple, what would you understand or expect to see this first Easter morning? On this day nearly two thousand years ago, what were Jesus' disciples doing? Not a lot! Despite being with Jesus for three years and learning about the Resurrection from someone they knew to be the Messiah, they were hidden away behind locked doors;

hoping no-one would see them. It was as if the Jesus they believed in had let them down. All they had given up to follow him was wasted.

Mary Magdalene was very different. She wanted to care for the body of Jesus, which would not have been a pretty sight after his crucifixion. She couldn't have gone the day before as that was the Jewish Sabbath. She was prepared for a bit of a smell, but not for what she saw. Just like the men who arrived only when told, she thought that the body of Jesus has for some reason been moved. She had also heard the promise of Resurrection, but she wasn't able to link the missing body with what Jesus had said. She was one of the women closest to Jesus – apart from his mother Mary, perhaps the one who understood him the most. No wonder she was crying. But, unlike the men, she had the bravery at least to look. She assumed he was dead; she thought that the man she saw was a gardener. Jesus wouldn't allow her to touch him, so was he really there? Was the image she saw truly human? Just as the girl whose story I told you, it wasn't her eyes which convinced her, it was only when he spoke that she recognised who he was – and believed he was alive.

A good romantic story but, so many years later, what could convince us? As you will know, evidence is important. To people then the obvious message was that this was the real Jesus. All that he had said when he preached about future life, what he had said to the dying thief, had not been enough to convince the disciples. They needed a completely satisfying demonstration. So what happened to convince them so fully that they not only wrote gospels about Jesus and worked to spread his message but, in most cases, died for him as well?

How this convincing was done is important for us because we have to be convinced too. Some of us are perhaps absolutely certain that Jesus rose from the dead and so too will we – no doubts ever at all. If that is true for you, then you are marvellously lucky. Most of us are probably in doubt in varying degrees and for different reasons. We would like to believe but are not sure. So let's look at what the similarly uncertain disciples saw and experienced as they gradually realised what had happened.

First the report that the great stone over the tomb had been moved – true, it couldn't be moved from the inside, so what had happened? The grave clothes were still there, so it looked as if something other than body snatching had taken place. John, who gets there first but is afraid to go in, then follows Peter and realises what has happened. He saw and believed. He managed to piece together what he had seen with what he had heard Jesus speak about before his arrest. As they examined the evidence we can almost imagine the disciples gradually coming to a realisation that they had been stupid. They had deserted Jesus at his crucifixion and then hidden away. Yet here was an empty tomb and no evidence of a body taken in haste, confirming the evidence of Mary Magdalene – I have seen the Lord. And then so did Peter, and then the twelve and then 500 and then others in the next forty days. And there was no doubt who they had seen. There could be no clever substitution for the nail-holes and the wound of the thrust of the spear in his side. He could not be ghostly - a phantom - since he could eat with them and they could touch him. Here, as we heard in today's gospel, was a real person. Put your finger here and see my hands, and put out your hand and place it in my side. And then he added, especially for us – Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.

The disciples were convinced – and it's made pretty clear that they weren't expecting it. No-one writes stories about themselves as stupid and unbelieving; that is, unless the results were life-changing. We might like to think we would not be quite as thick as the disciples, but we know that, in a similar situation, what would be top for us would be to save our own skins. So what is needed to convince you and me so we can tell others of the truth of what went on that morning so many years ago?

The essentials to be found within the scope of Jesus' acted-out visual aid. But we too have to witness, to demonstrate what we stand for as a body - the followers of the risen Christ - or it seems as though the demonstration made for us on Easter morning is just the nice end to a fairy story that began with Mary at Christmas – Easter eggs instead of Christmas cake. At Christmas we largely ignore the children killed when Herod ordered the slaughter of all under the age of two. Mary and Joseph took Jesus and fled to become asylum-seekers in Egypt. The reality behind Easter is no different. Most are interested in chocolate on Sunday and are embarrassed about Good Friday – though many wouldn't know what happened that day. Jesus is tortured, as was normal in those days and even today in many countries. The local rulers and faith leaders were dominated by Rome; they were very scared of upsetting their masters, and decisions were made without justice in mind. People were also very fickle. They had welcomed Jesus by scattering palm leaves across his path – we celebrated that last week on Palm Sunday. Less than a week later they were crying for Barabbas to be released instead of Jesus, no doubt egged on by those who felt Jesus was having a go at them. Where would you and I be? I suspect it would be shouting for Barabbas.

I have had a go at the disciples – though they did prove tough in the end. And added to that, I have accused us of being likely to shout for Barabbas. The first Easter was nearly two thousand years ago. So, what is different today?

First of all don't be worried if you're not totally convinced by all bits of the story. The first believers came slowly to their belief. Jesus was not the first or last to claim to be the Messiah, the Son of God. The disciples had the wonderful experience of three years with Jesus, and yet it only slowly dawned on them what had happened. Some of us may have been lucky, totally convinced by the story. Many more, including me, will be hoping it is true. We would love to realise the power and the truth of the risen Christ almost in an instant. We would hope to see the light. For most of us that doesn't happen – it is a gradual growing and understanding, just as it was for the disciples. However far you are along the path to realising what really happened, don't worry because most of the rest of us are stuck there with you.

The most important part of the story of the resurrection is that the first evidence, the first person who had the courage to go to the tomb, as we heard in the gospel today, was not a leader, not a person who had total life innocence, not one of the chosen twelve. It was Mary Magdalene, who was known to have been a sinner, but also who loved Jesus the most. A lesson for us all.

Connect with Gilead Books:

[Web site](#)

[Facebook Page](#)

[Blog](#)

[Smashwords](#)