

## **LIVERPOOL PEACE LECTURE**

### **Ours is a Moral Universe**

#### **Preamble**

Heartiest congratulations on the establishment of this Centre. I have to be mindful of what the psalmist declares about those who have things named after them. It is a great joy and a great honour to have been invited to give this inaugural lecture. I wonder though whether it is not a presumptuous thing to claim that appellation for my musings. The subject of my address is close to my heart and I am afraid you will be subjected to listening to a pet concern that is almost something of an obsession.

I have found myself returning often to a book of cartoons by the late Mel Calman, cartoonist of the Observer entitled "My God." It is charming line drawings that tickle funny bones and yet are not entirely frivolous. One shows God contemplating a poster that says "God is dead," which dates it. God mutters "That makes me feel insecure." But for our purposes it is this one I want to turn to, of a somewhat distraught God declaring, "Oh dear, I think I have lost my copy of the divine plan."

Looking at the state of the world one might be forgiven for wondering if God had a plan at all ever. Well there are floods here and severe droughts there; there are huge surpluses in one place and devastating famines elsewhere etc. You are left wondering whether God might not have arranged things a little better, for instance that there was enough water and food for everyone everywhere. And then we have not yet mentioned the doleful catastrophe of ghastlinesses about us - Darfur, the carnage in the Middle East, the awfulness in Zimbabwe, the DRC, Sri Lanka, Burma, Iraq, Afghanistan, the predatory greed spawning the Enrons and Parmalets - it is a pretty mess and nothing to suggest a plan - only ghastly chaos. And when you throw in things like the demeaning and dehumanising poverty that is the lot of so many of God's children where billions eke out an existence on less than \$2 a day, where so many are being mown down ruthlessly by malaria, TB, HIV/AIDS, then the evidence is overwhelming against any sort of order and planning. Those who want to argue otherwise seem to have taken on a Herculean task. I hope I might be a member of this group. To launch on this task I propose we examine three sets of phenomena.

## **Human Longing:**

Here is the first. A few years ago there was an interesting survey in the business section of the New York Times. I must confess that I do not normally peruse this part of any newspaper. But my eye was caught by the report which referred to the sense of discontent that a number of the nouveau rich were experiencing. They had done quite well for themselves, had moved out of their parents suburbs into more upmarket ones. They had better and bigger homes and smarter cars and their children went to better schools than those they had attended. In material terms they had made it. And yet there was a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction, of something missing. We have here more than a hint that the phenomenal world or its attributes and possessions just cannot make it, that they suffer from an inherent and inescapable inadequacy, that human beings seem to be made for more than can be apprehended by the senses, that there is an aching longing for, yes, the spiritual, even the transcendent. A little more about this anon.

## **History**

The above is part of the result of our appraisal of human existence. A second phenomenon that would require explaining is this. History both ancient and contemporary provides an interesting spectacle. Frequently we have seen accounts of men (it is almost exclusively men) who wielded very considerable power, who were indeed masters of much of what they surveyed. At the time when they flourished they seemed indeed to be invincible, they were cocks of the walk and they strutted about on their respective stages as if they would last forever and almost always they ruled with an iron hand their subjects or a certain group of them.

Cowering under what almost invariably was an oppressive and vicious regime, the last thing that entered the rulers head was having to give an account of this rule, of contemplating anytime when he was not the top dog. It appears that most such rulers have either not learned the lessons of history about the fate of such regimes as his, or he provides further confirmation of the wags observation that we learn from history that we don't learn from history. It is the same kind of attitude that some of us have. That road accidents happen to other people.

In the face of overwhelming evidence that oppressive regimes, that show scant respect for human rights, who are guilty of the most egregious violations, at some point must give account, often through the violent

method of a coup, will sometimes even go so far as to designate themselves President for life. Mercifully it almost always turns out to be a truncated life term. They will have the most ostentatious uniforms emblazoned with medals and other decorations of dubious validity and have grand titles such as Idi Amin King of Scotland.

It might take a long time, unconscionably long for those who have to run the gauntlet of the viciousness of such regimes, but the verdict of history is that such rulers ultimately come a cropper and are fated to bite the dust ignominiously. Most recently the rogues gallery contains such persons as Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Amin, Mobutu, Franco, the apartheid rulers. They have become the flotsam and jetsam of history. It would seem a reasonable conclusion to draw that the structure of the universe is such that it is intolerant of injustice, oppression and cruelty. These worthies will often have had airports, roads and other public places named after them, they will have had statues erected in their honour. Whenever a change of regime occurs as it certainly will, then those statues come crumbling to the ground and the place names cannot be wiped out quickly enough.

We have been celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of slavery. Many of the slave owners were powerful figures in their day and not to be trifled with. They were people of considerable substance with very significant political clout that is why the campaign for abolition did take as long as it did. No one would dare to suggest that a statue should be erected in memory of those erstwhile powerful figures. No, anyone who ventured to do so would be shot down from many quarters. Why is it possible however to have a William Wilberforce be given the distinction of a Westminster Abbey burial or that there should be a Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation as the one attached to the University of Hull and no one would raise objections to that? Unless indeed it is that we acknowledge that there are things which are right and others that are wrong - that right and wrong are not matters of indifference but that they are to be taken seriously. There is a consistency and regularity - that those who use their political power for their self aggrandisement, to oppress others and to act viciously do in the end come a cropper, then we can reasonably say it is something like a natural law. The mills of God do indeed grind slowly but do so exceedingly fine. It appears to be in the texture of the universe that those who act viciously do come to a sticky end - that this is not mere wishful thinking.

## **Goodness**

And so to a third characteristic of our world. One would have thought that in a world where the race is to the swiftest, a world of ruthless competitiveness, of the rat race in which the devil takes the hindmost, where no sentimental nonsense is tolerated about caring for the weak and indigent, that those who would be the heroes, the heroines to be admired, would be the hardnosed, the aggressive, the macho, those who have made it, the cynical, unsentimental. But what is in fact the case? It is the total opposite of this. Those whom we admire almost universally are not those whom the world would have counted as successes, with huge bank balances and other signs of ostentatious success.

There are many things we could say about a Mother Teresa, but macho would certainly not be one of the words we would use of her. Indeed one might say that in a sense she was a failure in not being able to eradicate poverty and she never solved conditions that produced the derelicts, she and her religious community have rescued from the streets and tried to give shreds of human dignity before they died. And yet universally she has been acclaimed for her compassionate caring for her charges. She was regarded as a living saint by many before her death. People the world over have held her in awe and revered her. The same can be said of figures such as the Dalai Lama, Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela.

We hold them in awe, our hearts thrill when we hear of their work and accomplishments. For an instant we are proud to be human and to have had our lives touched by theirs. It is as if we do indeed have internal antennae that hone in on goodness and we are reminded powerfully by their examples that we are indeed made for goodness, created to inhabit a universe that is fundamentally good.

## **Conclusion**

We are indeed remarkable creatures almost the ultimate paradox, the finite made for the infinite. Those nouveau rich were showing forth this aspect of our being when they experienced a gnawing discontent. Some have said we each have a God shaped space which only God can fill. We are fundamentally good. It is evil, the bad which is the aberration. We are made for goodness, for transcendence. St Augustine of Hippo declared of God, "thou has made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee". Anything less than God will always fall short of giving us true satisfaction.

We are made for togetherness, for interdependence, for we are created in the image of a God who as Trinity is community. We in Africa speak of ubuntu - that I am only because you are - person is a person through other persons. We are made for family, God's family, the human family, where there are no outsiders, all are insiders. In a family the ethic of family obtains: from each according to their ability, to each according to their need. Thus it is that we will never win wars against terror as long as there are conditions in the world of poverty, disease, ignorance etc which make people desperate.

If we are family how could we go on spending what are really obscene amounts on budgets of death and destruction when we know that a small fraction of these budgets would ensure that God's children, our sisters and brothers everywhere, would have clean water to drink, enough food to eat, have decent houses, adequate affordable healthcare, good education? How can we go on being so reckless about the lives of our sisters and brothers?

Martin Luther King said, "Unless we learn to live together as brothers (and we can add sisters) we will perish together as fools." You see we do inhabit a moral universe, our continued excessive greenhouse gas emissions are already melting the ice in the polar regions. The sea levels are already inundating some Islands, polluting their water supplies.

### **The Defiant Ones**

We can be free only together, we can be secure and safe only together, we can be prosperous only together. Yes we can be human only together.