

TENTH ANNIVERSARY

EBOR LECTURE

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‘A JOURNEY AROUND JUSTICE’

The Right Reverend James Jones

It is an honour to be invited to give the 10th Anniversary Lecture. Looking at the spectrum of excellent speakers it is easy to discern a thread weaving its way through the canvas of topics. How do we create a more just society? Perhaps I am imposing my own interpretation! For the two decades of my episcopal ministry which began here in York Minister (I was Lord Habgood’s last ordination of a bishop) first in Hull and then in Liverpool I have seen the different faces of justice. I have deliberately chosen this title of “A Journey around Justice” for I am only too aware of falling short of that ideal both personally and professionally. Nevertheless, as I hope to show through this autobiographical reflection the search for justice has been a thread that has woven its way through my own ministry and provided me with a sort of tapestry that I can share with you today.

I recently acquired an Icon of Christ from an orthodox monastery in Cyprus. It now hangs in my study. My three year old grandson was playing there. I asked him "Do you like Papa's new picture of Jesus?" He frowned and without looking up at it said emphatically, "No!". "Oh" I replied "Why's that?" Ben frowned even more "He's cross." I was tempted to try and explain, to soften the image in his mind but decided to let it be. After all, the Jesus of this Icon did look cross! What is more there were definitely times in his life when Jesus was cross and did not hide his anger. When followers tried to shoo away the children or the woman anointing him our Lord barely concealed his anger. And when he saw the corruption in the Temple he gave vent to his fury like a prophet.

Jesus showed us that anger can be a virtue especially when it's deployed against injustice. And maybe one day Ben will discover that when he himself gets cross at the lack of fairness in this world he will have an ally in Jesus and as Ben looks at history he will realise that it is virtuous anger which railed against injustice that led to the ending of child labour, the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women and the liberation of gay people.

Anger is the proper response to injustice. It was said of the prophets of the Old Testament that they were “full of the fury of the Lord”. Anger gave momentum to social reform. But staying with childhood perceptions for a moment, one of the first phrases to come “out of the mouths of babes and sucklings” is “that’s not fair”.

Whether this is nature or nurture it shows that at an early age there is a capacity to frame a moral proposition. It may well start with siblings squabbling over the sharing of a box of smarties but very soon they will begin to extrapolate from their own little world to make judgements about the wider world around them.

It makes me believe that together with the instincts for survival, sex and food there is also a moral instinct whereby we intuit right and wrong. I believe this instinct is universal although it may well be undeveloped in various cultures at different times. Human progress is measured by the approximation of humanity to those absolute values of which justice is one of the principals.

Although you do not have to be a believer in God to subscribe to such absolute principles people of faith see God as the locus of these values.

It seems to me that the calling of the church is to help people trace back from their moral intuition to the divine source and especially to the figure of Jesus Christ who personified these values of justice and mercy. Justice is one of the pillars of the Christian faith and it lies at the heart of mission. It is what ordinary people feel passionately about and it is a conundrum that they have such little regard for the church.

But the church can sometimes give the impression that in spite of Jesus telling us to seek first the Kingdom of God and his Justice it is more important to attend to the individual and to their personal faith. Furthermore, when Christians do engage in public issues about justice they'll often be rebuked by others quoting Jesus saying, "My Kingdom is not of this world". This is a mis-translation. Jesus says, "My Kingdom is not from this world". He was challenging Pilate who thought that he had authority over him. Jesus' riposte was that his own kingship did not come from Pilate, the Emperor or anyone else. It was from God alone.

The Protestant Church has, especially since the Reformation, the 500th anniversary of which we celebrate next year, emphasised the doctrine of justification by faith and practised a faith in which this dogma took precedence over all else including social justice. But how can a person be reconciled through the Cross of Christ to the God of Justice and Mercy and not be caught up in the divine dynamic and moral imperative of acting justly and loving mercy in God's world?

If Justification by Faith and Doing Justice represent the two sides of the coin of Christian mission, each expressed by the evangelical and liberal traditions of Christianity, then it was going to Hull as its Suffragan Bishop in 1994 that enabled me to begin to make connections between the two.

I remember at my interview with Dr John Habgood, Archbishop of York, being asked about the differences between the two traditions. The evangelical tradition from which I came was very good at definitions, I said, but that once you had read one book about a theological idea you had read them all; whereas the Liberal tradition it seemed to me was about the imagination and exploration beyond the boundaries.

The Archbishop said he thought the Liberals could do with more definition; I replied that I thought evangelicals could do with more imagination.

My own imagination was to be stretched within months of arriving in Hull. On Easter Sunday 1995 through the extraordinary ministry of the church community worker and at her invitation I took the service in the church on the Longhill Estate, one of the most challenging in Europe. A young girl called Stacey had written two prayers which she read at the end of the service. Six weeks later she was murdered when someone set her house on fire. The family asked me to take her funeral. Without breaking pastoral confidences, all that I had learned thus far about faith and ministry turned to dust in my hands as I tried to minister to the family and to the community.

But the whole experience left its mark on me and shaped my ministry in Hull and Liverpool. What was evident was that when it came to fairness Stacey did not share the same opportunities and privileges as my own children.

In terms of justice it was intuitively manifest that the world in which Stacey was born and died was anything but fair. And in terms of the philosopher, John Rawls, society is clearly not just because “each person” does not “have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others”.

In both Hull and Liverpool I threw myself into the regeneration of the cities which like most northern cities suffered from urban diabetes. The blood pumps around the heart of the city with its prestigious buildings but fails to reach the extremities of the outer estates which atrophy and die. I came to see that the key to regeneration is to unblock those arteries and get the blood and the money circulating around the whole body. To do this you need to engage and empower local people but there is so much that militates against their involvement.

The language itself reveals the problem. Those who live in communities use organic language like planting, seeds and branching out. But those who control the purse strings use not organic but mechanical language like triggers, levers, buttons, start-ups and outputs.

I was asked to chair the New Deal for Community programme in Liverpool and soon discovered with the people that you cannot prescribe mechanical solutions to organic problems.

In both Hull and Liverpool the words of Jesus that resonated with me were those he wept with as he looked over the city “If only you knew the things that made for peace”. What blights areas of challenge are low self-esteem and low aspiration. But if justice is about levelling the playing field especially for children and young people how do you even out esteem and aspiration? Justice requires both intervention and immersion. They are the two dynamics of the incarnation. And both require the imagination. We have to put ourselves in the shoes of the other and try to see the world through their eyes.

John McIntyre in his book “Faith, Theology and the Imagination” argues that the imagination was the prelude to the incarnation. It is only because God could imagine what it was like to be traumatised by sin and evil that he sent his child Jesus into the world. This is both the inspiration and the pattern for Christian engagement.

It is why I value the Church of England's understanding of the Kingdom of God and of its mission. There isn't a corner of England not covered by a parish. We believe the Kingdom of God is the world and not just the Church. When a person rings up a vicar for help she's not asked if she comes to church, but where she lives. If she lives in that corner of God's Kingdom covered by his or her parish the Vicar is there for her. It's called the cure of souls.

This national presence in every parish is the unique contribution of the Church of England to the mission of God. But the centralising of funding and of decision-making about mission may well put at risk this universal presence. Making congregations pay for their own clergy and controlling mission initiatives could well eventually withdraw funding from areas of challenge unable to sustain a Christian presence in the community.

Historically it's been the church that's remained faithful to the community abandoned by the banks, shops, pub, schools and surgeries. Where people have suffered from consolidated poverty, low self-esteem and low aspiration it's been the Christian community of laity and clergy that have valued them.

Their intervention and immersion in a neighbourhood have voiced God's presence. By their deeds they have spoken of God's requirements of all who would follow him "to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God" (Micah 6)

But before I go any further and having referred several times to justice we should try and settle on a definition. Throughout the Bible we find episodes where people act unjustly. For example, in the Old Testament David steals Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite and conspires to kill him and is censured by Nathan the Prophet for the injustice of his adultery and murder.

In the New Testament Jesus tells a parable about the injustice of an unjust judge who will not grant justice to a widow. In all the cases of injustice it is about damaged relationships needing to be restored. Justice is relational.

Lactantius, a 4th century Christian apologist from North Africa offers a definition: "The whole point of justice consists in our providing for others through humanity what we provide for our own families through affection."

This is to set the bar at a very high level not least because “families” in this context would have meant the extended family and tribe. But in my ministry both in Hull and Liverpool I have seen Christians of every denomination seek to serve their local communities with that degree of commitment. They live out on a daily basis the imperative of Jesus, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice”. It’s when we’re seen righting wrongs that the Christian faith becomes credible and real to ordinary people not least because in each person there is this moral instinct and innate hunger for fairness.

It’s one of the discoveries I made through chairing the Hillsborough Independent Panel. I’ve spoken and written about this elsewhere. An edited version of a lecture I gave in August at York St John’s Global Congress on Sports and Christianity will be published in the January edition of Theology. I’ve often encountered surprise that a bishop should have been chosen to be the chair of the Hillsborough Panel. It says something about people’s preconceptions of bishops! But for the families of the 96 who were let down by the Police, the Press, Politicians, Parliament and even the judiciary to whom do you turn.

The more I entered into the work the more it resonated for me with so much of what Jesus taught about justice not least in that parable of the Unjust Judge in Luke 18: 1- 8:

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." ' And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

At the 27th and last Hillsborough Memorial Service at Anfield I spoke about the parable and how I had read it every day for 3 months prior to publishing our report.

When I got to that point of the story and saying that although the widow's plea for justice was rejected by the unjust judge SHE WOULD NOT GIVE UP, the widow's dignified defiance connected with the 27 year struggle of the families for justice and accountability, the whole stadium of over 20,000 people burst into applause.

On my way home that night I couldn't help reflecting that here were thousands of ordinary people cheering the words of Jesus that resonated with their own deepest longings. In that moment I also felt frustration at all the talk of living in a 'post-Christian culture'! No. Here were people cheering a Jesus who championed their own innate sense of fairness and justice. The only reason society might be deemed post-Christian by the church is because the church becomes sub-Christian when it fails to address the dreams and dreads of the human family in the light of God's requirement for justice and mercy by preferring its own internal agenda.

I served in the House of Bishops for nearly twenty years and there was not a meeting that did not have on its agenda either the ordination of women or gay relationships or both.

These are vitally important issues but the emotional energy consumed by these debates has been enormous. But unless my memory is failing me the framework for these debates was seldom set according to the moral principles of justice. Rather, they were textual exchanges in search of a biblical anthropology. It seems in retrospect indicative of a church that had lost sight of the imperative to act justly.

Now that the Prime Minister of the UK and the Chancellor of Germany are both women our recent ecclesiastical debates about women and biblical anthropology seem quaint and even bizarre. The creation narrative tells us “in the image of God he made them male and female” and suggests an equality between men and women in being the divine image. Leadership in the New Testament Church is both functional and ontological so that the apostle is the one to be imitated and through that imitation believers imitate Christ and through imitating Christ imitate God. In other words apostolic leadership is all about conforming humanity to the image of God. Since both male and female predicate the divine image both men and women can equally be the means of restoring humanity in the image of God.

A turning point in my own understanding was the realisation that the function of the priest and the bishop was to feed the body of Christ. The first person to feed his body was a woman. If a woman could feed the body of Christ in the flesh then she surely could feed the Body of Christ in the Spirit. The history of women from being a possession of men to becoming a possessor of her own destiny is ongoing around the world and it is a narrative of justice. I wish I myself had understood and articulated that element of justice earlier in the debate in the House of Bishops. Without offering any excuses on my part I simply record that the debate was seldom framed in those terms.

The same is true in the continuing debate about gay relationships. Those who find themselves naturally attracted to those of the same gender long to express their God-given desire for intimacy in a same sex relationship. It is not a matter of choice. It is an issue of identity. It is a given and in the strictest theological sense of that word it is a grace.

As many will know, I did not always see it that way and I certainly did not frame the discussion in terms of either difference, justice or diversity. The change came from listening both to the LGBT community and to scripture.

I have written more fully on this and one of my early essays was recently published in 'Journeys in Grace and Truth' by Jayne Ozanne. I actually believe that scripture has more to teach us about the nature of same gender relationship than we have yet understood. Indeed, the doctrine of the Trinity shows that diversity is at the heart of Creation, and it finds its expression in the full range of different human abilities and in the variety of human passion and love.

Without making any assumptions I would like to see greater theological and psychological reflection on the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved. The extraordinary intimacy of that relationship is revealed in the Gospel of John. In the prologue of John we read that "no one has ever seen God; the only begotten one who is in the bosom of the Father has declared him." The only other time the evangelist uses the word 'bosom' is in John 13 to describe the Beloved reclining against the 'bosom' of Jesus. John is the most literary of all the gospels. Words and images are chosen thoughtfully. Vine's Expository Dictionary says that KOLPOS is used "figuratively of a place of blessedness with another".

The fact that the evangelist uses this one word to describe both the relationship between God the Father and God the Son and between Jesus and the Beloved suggests an extraordinary intimacy in the latter. The closeness of the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved is expressed again at the Cross where Jesus is intimately aware of a Trinity of Love - his Heavenly Father, his Earthly Mother and his Beloved friend. To his mother he says, "Woman, here is your son" and to his Beloved disciple says, "Here is your mother". The significance of what he has done is expanded in the following words "And from that moment the disciple took her into his own (home)". I hope it is not too scandalous a thought to suggest that out of love for them both and by making them mother and son it was in effect an 'in law' relationship. Clearly the relationship between Jesus and the Beloved was different from the rest of the disciples and unique and intimate. The Davidic ancestry of Jesus included a famous example of intimacy between David and Jonathan which was emotional (they wept together), physical (they embraced each other) and spiritual (they made a covenant together before God). In our own highly sexualised culture the question almost everyone wants to ask is 'was the relationship between David and Jonathan sexual?'.

But I'm going to leave that as an obsession of our culture in favour of saying simply that the Bible is not afraid to speak of people of the same gender expressing love for one another.

These Biblical episodes create a very different context for us to consider the human rights of those who find that the fulfilment of their longing for intimacy rests exclusively in a relationship with someone of the same gender. While the church still agonises over this issue the matter has already been settled by wider society who have now moved on and look back at the church without a second glance.

Although there have been notable examples of champions of human rights in the history of the church (indeed Thomas Aquinas laid down the foundation stones for a theory of human rights) the church has invariably been conservative and slow to recognise the rights not just of women and of gays but of other races. In spite of our own Province being served by a black Archbishop the Church of England does not yet reflect the diversity of the nation.

When I was a curate in Bristol in the 1980s I heard a pastor of a black-led Pentecostal church tell a gathering of clergy that when he came to this country in the 1950s his mother said “Son, when you arrive first find a church so you can thank God that you’ve arrived safely; second, find a Post Office so you can write home and tell me you’ve got there; and third find a friend”. The black pastor paused and then added wistfully “I eventually found the Post Office”.

The inhospitable and racially unjust nature of the church is a direct contradiction of the Cleansing of the Temple. Let me explain. The common interpretation of the overturning of the tables of the moneylenders obscures one of the important challenges of Jesus’ ministry. We have concentrated on his condemnation of the authorities for turning the Temple into “a den of thieves” and have overlooked the thrust of his challenge which is that the House of God should be “a House of Prayer for all races”.

The outer court of the Temple was set aside for the Gentiles, the people from different stock who wanted to draw near to the God of Abraham and Moses. This is where the merchants set up their stalls.

Their crime was not so much their trade but the fact that in filling the Court of the Gentiles they were denying the other races their sacred space.

When Jesus, again full of a prophet's fury, overturns the stalls he doesn't then let anyone else pass through. He has restored the sanctity of the Temple Court of the Gentiles and restored to the people their sacred space. He quotes from both Isaiah and Jeremiah the prophets who prophesy that one day "foreigners who join themselves to the Lord ... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer" (Isaiah 56: 6,7).

This passage begins with Isaiah saying "Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come". The justice of God is to be revealed by his gathering together not just the children but also "the outcasts of Israel and others" "for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples". The cleansing of the Temple was more of a rage against racism than a rant about capitalism. This exposition is a challenge to any national church and especially to the Church of England, the church established in and for England. To what extent are we a House of Prayer for all the people?

A church becomes a community of belonging when all those who come feel that they can be true to themselves within its embrace. I love the story of Jesus as a boy being found in the Temple and being chastised by his mother who thought he was lost. The literal response of Jesus is, “Did you not know that in the things of my Father it behoves (me) to be me?” There’s no mention of House or Temple. Just “The things of my Father”. (Luke 2: 49). Howard Marshall’s Commentary on the Greek Text says, “The effect of the saying is to show that Jesus is indeed the Son of God”. In other words, his answer is as much about his own identity as it is about where he was found.

Jesus was being true to himself by seeking out the Temple teachers and questioning them. Jesus’ answer expressed “a sense of divine compulsion” about what he was doing and who he was. It was about his own identity and being true to himself even as a lad. I believe this has significance for women, for gays, for people of diversity and for all who are differently able. Is the church a community for all people where each can be true to themselves?

The answer is a matter of justice. Indeed, I would go further and say that the pillars of every religion are truth and love and you cannot be true to the truth if you cannot be true to yourself, and if God is the conceiver of love then God is to be found wherever true love lies. The church should be a House of Prayer for all people, for all those seeking the truth who seek to be true to themselves and for all those seeking love who long to be loved as they themselves love.

The area of disability is yet another example of where the prophets have often been found outside the Church. In the Old Testament the disabled were not allowed into the Temple. Although no-one today would share that view the way many of our churches are built gives out the same message. And to that I must add Bishops' houses. To my own personal shame the Chapel at Bishop's Lodge was completely inaccessible to people of different ability. One of the Mayors even though a leading lay member of the diocese refused to attend a Civic Reception at Bishops Lodge (rightly so) because we could not accommodate his spouse who was in a wheelchair through MS.

At a recent Congress on Christianity and Sport sponsored by this University, at which I gave a paper on the Hillsborough Disaster, I listened to a discussion on disability and faith and the question that if people were made in the image of God did that mean that God was disabled. In a very real sense in the crucifixion of Jesus God is disabled, but I think I prefer to understand disability in terms of us all being differently able and together reflecting the diversity of God the Holy Trinity who is a threesome of divine persons each able distinctly and differently to create, redeem and empower

This Gospel of boundless acceptance is powerful with offenders. In my seven years as Bishop to Prisons I sat in many cells listening to prisoners. I made a series of programmes for Radio 4 called "The Bishop and the Prisoner". I observed many sessions of Restorative Justice where offenders came face to face with the experiences of victims of crime. I witnessed the transforming power of these encounters. What many people don't know, often including incoming Secretaries of State for Justice and many prison Governors, is that the 1952 Prison Act specifies by statute only three posts for a prison: a Governor, a Medical officer and a Church of England Priest.

The presence of a chaplain signals that in the system of retribution, reform and rehabilitation which is designed to protect the public there is a spiritual dimension.

The challenge for the National Offender Management Service is to ensure that with the need to keep within budgets and the increase in the number of prisoners the prison estate resists becoming just a warehouse for the incorrigible and insists on becoming a greenhouse for the redeemable.

This isn't the place for me to offer a paper on penal reform. I am impressed by the extraordinary number of initiatives often sponsored by faith communities to intervene in the cycle of re-offending. The conclusion I have drawn from my own involvement is, I am afraid, that old cliché: there but for the grace of God go I.

At one gathering of prison chaplains I identified the five simple steps it takes to go from outside the prison wall to inside - a broken relationship, losing your job, alienating family and friends, debt, then doing something criminal in order to survive. But many of the men and women I met could trace their path into offending back to childhood.

I often quote that line from Graham Greene's "The Power and the Glory", "There's always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in". What floods through that door is unlikely to be fair for many children in the world.

I was invited to see a play at Altcourse Prison written and performed by the prisoners. It was all about the choices you have to make every day inside. It was gripping. After taking their bow at the end each actor stepped forward to tell the audience how they had come to be inside. The lead actor who was 19 told how he'd been brought up by his single mother who brought home a succession of 'uncles' One of them used to beat her up. As a boy he couldn't do anything to protect her and stored up guilt and anger. Aged 18 he was living with his sister. One night the man she brought back with her began beating her up. "Darren", let's call him, was in the house. Something snapped inside. He rushed to his sister's defence, laid into the man and nearly killed him in the eruption of fury and fear that had lain dormant for so many years.

What was moving about his story was that he kept punctuating it by saying he wasn't making excuses. "I know I done wrong. That's just how it was. I'm taking my punishment. I'm making sure when I get out I never come back." What was electrifying was that the audience was made up of some of the most challenging young people on Merseyside who could see their futures in the eyes of the actors who came down off the stage to talk and listen to the kids. "There but for the grace of God."

I believe in a Day of Judgement. I believe that justice has no meaning without it. But I also believe that it may well be that the Lord in his just omniscience will deem that the Darrens of this world will have done more with their one talent of opportunity than many of us will have done with our ten. If there is any justice in the world, that is what I truly believe.

Thinking of the Day of Judgement brings me to that apocalyptic scene envisaged by Jesus when he as the Child of Adam returns in glory (Matthew 25) to judge the world. I know many no longer talk or teach about a God of Judgement. The idea is dismissed as being "very Old Testament".

But, in fact, you cannot read the Gospels even with all the redactions of modern theology without seeing that there is a definite strain of judgement in Jesus' teaching. Interestingly, those who dismiss notions of judgement as medieval are often the first to question "why doesn't God do something about the state of the world?" But implicit in such a hope is the idea that God should divide the good from the bad and remove the latter from the face of the earth. What is that if it isn't an act of judgement?

The question, however, is well put for again to return to the door through which I entered at the beginning of the lecture it reveals that innate sense of justice that can be traced right back through the child's cry "It's not fair" to the moral instinct implanted in us all. That thirst for justice which our Lord called us to crave. The answer, of course, to the plea that God should act justly and do away with injustice, sin and evil leaves all humanity, certainly me, wondering who on earth would be left. If God were to remove every cause of human misery who could possibly endure "the day of his coming"? Not I. It is why we are all of us utterly dependent upon the mercy of God, as well as his justice.

That is why the Cross and Justification by faith are so central to a proper understanding of the Justice and Mercy of God and his Kingdom.

But before I conclude let's revisit that scene of the sheep and the goats and the incredulity of those who thought they were sheep only to find that God classified them as goats. You will recall that Jesus, the Child of Adam (for that is what the Son of Man means,) says that those who have failed to help the children of Adam, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner, failed to help him.

It struck me last year when preparing an address for the "Reconciling God's Planet" Conference at Coventry Cathedral that the different apocalyptic categories listed by Jesus relate specifically to the environmental catastrophes of today. Famine, drought, exile, destitution, disease and incarceration. I have written about the relationship between Jesus and the Earth (SPCK) in a book of that name. I believe there is a theological and biblical imperative to care for the earth and earlier this year spoke about it at the Faraday Institute in Cambridge.

The Lord's Prayer with its central petition to do God's will on earth as it is done in Heaven is a plea for the earthing of heaven which in turn is a prayer for environmental justice.

The only title Jesus uses of himself "Son of Man" means Child of Adam or Child of the One hewn from the Earth. St John tells us in the prologue that "all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (1:4) and St Paul adds "all things have been created through him and for him". Never has so much theology been condensed into two such small words "through" and "for". It means that environmental injustice is an undoing of God's creative work through and for Christ which is ultimately a blasphemy. It is strong stuff on which to end and feels like beating the audience with a stick.

So, let me end this journey around justice by simply going back to where I began and the picture of Jesus. Yes, he is cross in the Icon in my study but that is a side of his character that flows from the core of his being which is love. He's angry at injustice because he loves all whom he has made and hates (yes, hates) to see their desecration and destruction.

That love is seen in another more famous Icon by Rublev interpreted as a picture of the three persons of the Trinity. Remarkably the Three are looking both at one another and outward to the unseen guest observing the scene. In the centre of the table is a dish and a lamb's head which speaks to me of the Lamb of God who will leave eternity and enter the sphere of space and time in human history to take away the sins of the world.

Bishop John V Taylor reflecting on the New Testament verse which says "The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13: 8 King James) said it showed that we live in a pre-forgiven universe. In other words, before we sinned, indeed before we were created, God made provision for our forgiveness and the remission of our sins of injustice. But the thought that enthralls me about this scene from eternity is what conversation must have passed between the three persons of the Trinity about which of them would become the Lamb that would go to the Cross so that the unjust might one day be made just in the eyes of God.

But I close with Ben and how I often pray for him and Sophie our grandchildren. St Luke tells us that when Mary and Joseph brought the Child Jesus to the Temple they placed him in the arms of Simeon who was described as 'just' and 'devout' (dikaios and eulabes). At the outset Jesus is cradled in the arms of justice and faith. A model for the life of Christ – for our children and grandchildren and for all who might follow him.

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