

## **Easter School**

### **“The Spiritual and Moral Imperatives in the life of Christ”**

**April 2020**

I hope you won't think me discourteous if I begin by saying that this lecture is not for you. I have in mind those who live their lives beyond the walls of the church, but within the boundary of God's love. If theology is the word about God then its audience is the whole of his creation of which the numbers who make up the church in all its expressions is but a small percentage. In this lecture I want to imagine Jesus as the person for all peoples and of all faiths and of none. Over 50 years ago John Robinson wrote in 'The New Reformation', "We have got to relearn that 'the house of God' is primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor's hut set up in the grounds." Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church Oxford, paraphrases it as "The Church was only ever meant to be the Contractor's hut on God's building site which is the world."

Last year I spoke at the annual prize giving of a large comprehensive school and began by saying, "I'm not here to tell you about God. I'm not here to tell you to follow your dreams. I'm not here to tell you to become the best possible person you can be. I'm here to tell you something that might not make you famous, rich or popular. I'm here with one simple message as you go through life always try to be fair and so make the world a fairer place."

I was taken aback by the hugely positive response from these young people who the world over have a keen sense of fairness. From a very early age we make moral judgements. “That’s not fair” is a child’s first cry when they fail to get their exact share of a bag of sweets or their turn in playing a game. Whether it’s nature or nurture, the way we are or the way we’re moulded, either way the sense of grievance is equally painful.

But while this sense of fairness is universal; there is a growing lack of confidence especially among young people in those institutions that need to arbitrate on what is fair and unfair. This is partly because those in positions of power have forfeited their authority through behaving unfairly themselves and partly because in the polyphonic babel of social media and of claim and counter claim about fake news, nobody knows who to believe anymore about what is true or false.

Although people, including the young, may be spiritual and moral they have lost interest in the Christian religion at least both in this country and in Europe. Two thousand years on this religion still cannot find a way to share a piece of bread with each other, it is still arguing about sexuality when everyone else has moved on, it seems more preoccupied with its own survival than with the extinction of the planet.

My own experience of young people shows that they are alert to the imperative to be fair; intuitively they are offended by bullying and racism, they are passionate about caring for the earth, they are infuriated by injustice, they resent being patronised by unaccountable authority and long to be heard in the corridors of power. They know they're not perfect, they can be pompous prophets about the environment and still drop litter in the street, but they want to live in a fairer world.

The older I get the more sympathetic I become to their criticisms of formal religion and the more I find myself attracted to the figure of Jesus who was often scathing in his criticism of religion and its leaders. Even as an adolescent he was well able to stand his ground against his own parents by asserting his own sense of moral purpose.

And that's where this lecture begins. When he was 12 Jesus fell out with his parents. They'd been in Jerusalem on a pilgrimage. Jesus got engrossed in conversation with some of the teachers in the Temple. It wasn't until his mother and father were well on their way home that they realised that Jesus wasn't in the group. They turned around, retraced their steps and found Jesus in the Temple deep in discussion with the resident Teachers. His mother rebuked her son for causing them such grief. His reply is variously translated "did you not know that I must be in my Father's House?" Or "Did you not know I must be about my Father's business." These were sufficient to put his mother in her place!

But what he says literally is even more defiant and illuminating, “Did you not know that in the things of my Father it is necessary to be me?”! This is revealing for at least two reasons. Firstly, he calls God ‘My Father’. Given that he was in the House of God with other believers he might have said “Our Father”. The way he personalised the relationship by saying “My Father” shows a precociousness and a self-awareness remarkable for a twelve year old. It was enough to stop Mary in her tracks and think again about the uniqueness of her child. Secondly, Jesus indicated he was somehow bound by a greater moral and spiritual purpose. “It is necessary” or “It behoves”, to use a more old-fashioned phrase, suggests that there is some overarching moral authority which had a claim on his life.

In Luke’s account of the life of Jesus, from the womb to beyond the tomb, he records Jesus saying fourteen times “It is necessary”. For those who are curious about Jesus these fourteen sayings illumine his life, his teaching, his purpose and his destiny. Those who have no time for institutional religion but are fascinated by the figure of Jesus because he appeals to the spiritual side of their nature will find that these sayings resonate with their quest for greater understanding of both why and how we ourselves should live. They get beneath the religion constructed over time in his name and offer the prospect of some universal values by which all of us might live our own lives.

These sayings range from 'It's necessary for you not to ignore the justice and the love of God but to act upon them' to 'It's necessary for you to be happy and rejoice when your brother who was dead is alive again, who was lost is now found'.

This appeal to a sense of fairness strikes a chord with young people. And it's there in the figure of Jesus both in what he taught and in how he treated others. Throughout his life and in very practical ways he sought to redress the imbalances of an unjust world where the cry goes up too often 'life isn't fair'. Children getting cancer, the good dying young, the poor going hungry because of where they were born and live, the innocent being oppressed by those in authority acting unjustly. Jesus challenged such endemic injustice and it cost him his life. He was an heroic figure standing up and standing out for fairness. This was one of the imperatives that ruled his life.

Four centuries later a Christian in North Africa was so moved by Jesus' demonstration of the justice of God that he tried to define it. His name was Lactantius. This was his definition: "The whole point of justice consists precisely in our providing for others through humanity what we provide for our own family through affection." That sets the bar very high! But it describes exactly the ethics of Jesus and how he lived his life and how we might live ours. But is it 'necessary' for everyone to live their life in this way?

When Jesus said “it is necessary” what was he appealing to? I imagine the appeal was to the same moral arbiter that we all appeal to implicitly whenever we think or exclaim “That’s not fair”. For whenever we deem something to be unjust we’re saying, or at least feeling, more than we just don’t like it. We’re not talking about preferences. We’re not talking about how we’ve been brought up or socially conditioned. If that was so then the person or group or action that we were condemning would be able to defend themselves against the charge of behaving unfairly simply by saying, ‘Well, you’ve been brought up one way; I’ve been conditioned differently.’ If morality is ultimately just an expression of personal preference then there is no overarching moral arbiter. But that is not how we behave. When in my lifetime the world formed a moral consensus that apartheid and institutional racism were evil and then acted uniformly against a sovereign nation to change its policies and social structures they were doing more than expressing a social preference. They were laying claim to intuiting a moral imperative that all men and women are equal regardless of colour or creed and that they should be treated equally. To condemn apartheid as unfair implied an absolute moral judgement. If it were not so then the international consensus could have been resisted by saying simply ‘Well, you’ve been conditioned one way, we’ve been conditioned differently. But the language and the actions of the campaigners (rightly) suggested that racism was an affront to the dignity of the people of colour and was an offence to some moral principle that was binding universally on all peoples. And on those grounds Nelson Mandela was released from prison and a nation was forced to change its ways.

When we use phrases such as “it is necessary” it speaks of an imperative that is external, objective and absolute. It may be experienced as internal, subjective and relative to our situation but its force lies in it being overarching and transcendent.

When Jesus defended his own behaviour by claiming “It is necessary” he was making an appeal which he expected his parents and others to recognise was as compelling for them as it was for him. The phrase “It is necessary” or “it behoves” implies a logical and moral necessity. For those who believe in God it extends to there being a divine necessity. The phrase opens up the concepts of obligation, responsibility and duty, In this episode with his mother Jesus saw himself not as an autonomous individual but rather as a human being living freely under an obligation to serve some greater purpose.

But when things go badly wrong it is difficult to believe in some greater purpose and even more difficult to believe that such a purpose is benign. One of the things that I find so compelling about Jesus is his readiness to concede that in a world where there is such injustice it is hard to keep on believing in a good God. He told a story about a widow who kept pleading with an unjust judge to grant her justice. The point of the story was that we should follow her example and not give up pleading and praying. God knows it’s hard to believe and not to throw in the towel when everybody and everyone in authority is against you.

As I write, our little grandson has just had a large tumour removed from his brain. The surgery, the radio and chemotherapy are gruelling. It seems so unfair that such a little person should have to go through such distressing treatment. The doctors and nurses are working what in Jesus' day would be called miracles. Yet that doesn't diminish the anguish for us all. One night as his Mum was putting him to bed and they were saying their prayers she asked him what they might pray for. "What's the point" Ben said, "He doesn't answer them". He is six. Six years younger than Jesus in the Temple. I hold on to the knowledge that of all people Jesus knew how easy it is for him and for us to lose heart in what seems such a heartless situation. "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray and not to lose heart." (Luke 18:1). So, for all of us who've ever lost hope in the power of God to answer our prayers here's a spiritual teacher who speaks into our universal condition.

The Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo, author of "The Silence" and "The Wonderful Fool" also wrote "A Life of Jesus". I strongly commend it to you especially if you want to feel the earthy humanity of Jesus and to understand the mystery of his Resurrection. He writes about the "enormous contrast (being) evident between Jesus during the passion and Jesus before the passion. One side is Jesus the powerful, the other is Jesus the powerless."

When Jesus told that parable about a woman being denied justice he could have been talking about himself, his arrest, his trial and his execution. He seemed so powerless in the face of such injustice. He was. He who had helped and healed others could not on the cross help himself.

And God the Father who was so eloquent at his baptism and transfiguration was so silent. It all seems so unfair. It was. He was one of us from the womb to the tomb.

It is here at the cross that we confront a conundrum. On the one hand Christians in company with all of humanity, believe in the right to justice while on the other hand we know that the road to a just world is necessarily paved with injustices. This is summed up by Jesus in two particular sayings when he talks about what is necessary to life.

In Luke 11 Jesus says “It is necessary for you not to ignore the justice and the love of God but to act upon them”. Here he clearly sets out the moral imperative to act justly. As I said in my prize giving speech to young students “be fair and so make the world a fairer place”. Let justice be your goal in life. Eschew fame, fortune and fulfilment. Make fairness your ambition. For justice is the greatest expression of love.

However, two chapters previously in Luke 9 we hear Jesus saying, “It is necessary for the Son of Man to suffer many things and to be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and to be killed.”

Suffering and dying are the lot of humanity. As Shakespeare declared, “sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.” Although it is a quote from Shylock in the Merchant of Venice who applies it to the Jewish people, its application is universal. We all suffer.

None of us is a stranger or immune to emotional, mental, spiritual and physical suffering. Nor was Jesus. The Son of Man (the child of the earth) was acquainted with sorrow and grief.

For the purpose of this lecture I want to group his 14 sayings in Luke's Gospel about what is necessary, what it behoves us to be and to do, into three groups.

I group these under 3 headings: Liberation, Identity, and Destiny. These are universal and timeless themes and speak to this generation that questions the past, feels alien in the present and doubts the future.

In the first group under Liberation I include the episodes and encounters where Jesus speaks into the desire marbled into every human heart to be free, to live life to the full and to be happy. Not only is this an aspiration of all humanity it is a moral necessity that we should strive to realise it.

In the second group of sayings under identity which is prefaced by Jesus insisting on the moral necessity to allow him to be true to himself I include the supreme moral values of justice and love that shape all that he does and says.

In the third group under Destiny, I include what is the significantly larger group of 7 sayings in which Jesus does not dodge the reality of suffering and death but insists on the moral necessity of confronting them with the defiant hope of the resurrection.

Ever since I was a student I've never been able to forget the saying by the French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, that 'Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains'. Although that saying had a particular historical context it expresses so much of the human experience. It holds an assumption that corresponds with Jesus' own insights that humanity naturally finds itself in a prison of other people's making. It also assumes that marbled into the human heart is a desire to be freed. The prison has many different builders and governors. Parents, school, peer groups, social media, society, religion itself, can so organise themselves that they construct constraints that mitigate against the essence of a human being. Parents can project onto their children their own failed ambitions, schools can favour some and demoralise others, societies have a history of ostracising the disabled and excluding others on the grounds of race, colour, creed and gender. Yet obstinately those oppressed fight to be free like victims being strangled struggling for breath. It may take decades or even centuries to challenge and overthrow the oppression but the yearning to be free that is wired into the human soul takes its time like yeast in the making of wine and baking of bread.

Jesus constantly came across people who were victims of one sort of oppression or another. He met one woman who'd been disabled and bent double for eighteen years. He laid hands on her and immediately she straightened up. The reason she then praised God was not just for the healing but because she was rid of the stigma that disabled people suffered including not being allowed to enter the Temple in case they defiled it.

But instead of welcoming her liberation from disease the religious leader objected to all this happening on the Sabbath, telling Jesus that he could heal her on any other day of the week but not this one! Jesus was outraged and indignant. To put it mildly! Sarcastically he challenged the local minister by making the comparison with watering an animal on the Sabbath. But then came the killer blow, “Was it not necessary for this woman to be released who’d been bound by Satan ...?” (Luke 13:16). Setting her free was a moral imperative. In that one episode of liberation in the face of religious intolerance and social taboo are concentrated and condensed the history of oppression and freedom as Jesus exercised in space and time the divine and moral imperative to set free all who have ever found themselves the victims of other people’s prejudices. Those who have sought to deny them the right to be themselves and to flourish in their own identity are stopped in their tracks by Jesus.

Jesus was on a mission to liberate the human family from all expressions of oppression. From evil, sin, disease and death. And whenever we see these forces of liberation at work in the world we witness the manifestation of the divine and universal imperative that whatever chains bind any of God’s creatures should be broken. All that Jesus did was founded upon this moral imperative.

If anyone should think that such a mission was a dry and dutiful ethical campaign we need only to turn to the parable of the Father and Two Sons and to the finale of the story to find that the essence and the end of his ethics were joy and happiness.

Having related the reconciliation of the son to his father and the mean-spirited reaction of the elder brother (which typified the hard-faced and hard-hearted resentment of the keenly religious) Jesus pronounced, "It is necessary (it behoves us all) to be merry and to rejoice because your brother was dead and is alive again; was lost and is now found" Luke 15:32. This joy and happiness was not some inane, superficial lightheartedness. It was a deep and divine delight in the face of hostile opposition.

Constantly throughout his short life and even shorter public life Jesus defied other people's projections and expectations in order to emphasise the divine imperative that he had come to demonstrate and under which he himself lived. As when he spotted the despised tax collector Zacchaeus hiding up a sycamore tree. Tax collectors acted on behalf of the Roman army of occupation and made their money by overcharging the people. They were not popular! But in spite of the animosity towards Zacchaeus and in spite of the possible misinterpretation of engaging with him Jesus could see beyond the political and social barriers and instead saw a person in bondage. He called Zacchaeus down from the tree and invited himself into his home. It is difficult for us to exaggerate how loathsome Zacchaeus was in the eyes of the people. But we need to feel what a social leper he was to appreciate the enormity of what Jesus said to him which is now known through the Gospels to the whole world. "It is necessary (it behoves me) to stay in your home"!

At the risk of alienating the ordinary people who loved him but hated the Romans and the tax-collecting collaborators Jesus not only befriends this social pariah but declares that there is a moral necessity to his desire to accept his hospitality and stay under his roof. In this one episode Jesus reveals the God without prejudices or boundaries; he shows that there are no limits to his love and that no-one is beyond the pale. It is the most moving and beautiful picture in space and time of a truth that is revealed in the kaleidoscopic images of eternity in the Book of Revelation that 'God will make a home with his people'. The reconciliation of earth with Heaven is the divine imperative. It is a glorious truth evidenced in this microcosmic encounter of Jesus with Zacchaeus. No wonder it had such a massive and transformative impact on Zacchaeus himself. Jesus had come to him. Made his home his. Now Zacchaeus was free. Free to give away his ill-gotten gains instead of garnering them corruptly. Whatever had constrained and compelled him to act immorally, whatever chains had imprisoned him, be they greed or guilt, were now broken and fallen at his feet. If only he had known Charles Wesley's hymn written 1700 years later he would have sung,

'My chains fell off, my heart was free  
I rose, went forth and followed thee.'

He experienced personally the moral imperative of Jesus to liberate the oppressed. And in his case the oppressed was also an oppressor!

Identity. The reason we can be true to our self and truthful about our self is that although we fall very far short of our own ideals as well as God's he treats us with the utmost fairness and loves us with an everlasting love. So Jesus insisted, "It is necessary for you (it behoves you) not to overlook but to act upon the justice and the love of God."

People often baulk at the thought of God judging the world and imagine that it contradicts the belief that God is loving. But the concepts of justice and judgement flow from love. Love is both active and passive. It gives as well as receives. It takes initiative as well as responding. Love necessarily acts against evil just as a good parent or good teacher will act against any threat to harm their charges. If a parent or teacher acquiesced in the bullying of one of their children they would have forfeited any right to call themselves loving. Love must act in judgement justly.

"It is necessary to act upon the justice and the love of God'.

## **SECTION ON HILLSBOROUGH**

10th Anniversary	Open Wound
20th Anniversary	Justice for 96
2010	Hillsborough Independent Panel
2012	Luke 18: 1 - 8
2013	1st Anniversary: Margaret Aspinall
2016	27th Anniversary 2nd Inquest 'unlawful killing' Anne Williams
2020	"How did you know?"

I confess that Hillsborough has absorbed more time and energy than any other aspect of my ministry. When I have questioned the rightness of such preoccupation I have concluded that love and justice are the primary values of the Kingdom of God and that in fulfilment of my own identity it has been necessary for me not to overlook but to act upon the love and justice of God: as I have prepared this lecture and looked back on the whole of my life I can trace a motif running through it, namely a desire to be fair. I attended the Duke of York's Royal Military School. I spent my last year there as Head Boy (Chief School Prefect). I have a strong recollection that I was always motivated by a desire to be fair and to be known to be fair. I cannot be certain of the origin of this ambition but I know for certain that I've always wanted to be fair in all my dealings (though recognise that I have not always been successful in this ambition) and might humbly wish to have written on my gravestone, "He tried to be fair".

Which brings me to the third collection of "It is necessary" sayings, namely "Destiny".

Half the sayings prefaced by "It is necessary" in Luke's Gospel relate to suffering. Time prevents me exploring each one but I will read all 7 and then offer a reflection on the collection. I chose to use the verb "It behoves".

“It behoves the Son of Man to suffer many things and to be rejected by the elders .... and to be killed” (9:22)

“Nevertheless it behoves me today, tomorrow and the following day to journey on because it is not possible for a prophet to die outside Jerusalem” 13: 33)

“And when you hear of wars and commotions don't be scared for it behoves these things to happen first” (21: 9)

“For I tell you that it behoves those things written about me to be fulfilled in me; and he was numbered with transgressors .... (22:37)

“It behoves the Son of Man to be delivered into the hands of the sinful to be crucified and to rise again on the third day” (24:7)

“O foolish ones slow to believe in your hearts all that the prophets foretold that it behoves the Christ to suffer these things then enter into his glory” (24:25)

“These words of mine that I spoke with you while I was with you that it behoves that all things should be fulfilled that were spoken of me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms” (24:46)

This collection of “it behoves” sayings is hall-marked with references to suffering, rejection, dying, conflict, transgressions and crucifixion. In Jesus' teaching there is a moral and spiritual necessity to his suffering.

But the collection is also hall-marked with references to resurrection and to glory. Jesus confronts us with a world of injustice and suffering which he challenges with justice and love and the hope of rising above it all into a new and glorious world.

It does not take a prophet to tell us that human life is shot through with the dis-ease of suffering; but it does take a prophet to hold before us the assurance and hope that disease and death are not the last word on human existence.

The identification of God with the suffering not just of humanity but of the whole of creation is captured beautifully by Jesus in the picture of a bird falling to the ground. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" Asks Jesus, "Yet not one of them falls to the ground without the Father!" Most translations add gratuitously "without the Father's will" or "without the Father knowing". Yet these words are not part of the original saying. "Without the Father". Full stop. It portrays God simply and utterly at one with us in our suffering.

Tim Parry was a 12 year old boy killed by the Warrington Bomb. His father, Colin, wrote about his grief and the final hours of Tim's life in hospital. Colin dismissed the medical team who had done their best and climbed onto Tim's bed and cradled his son as his life drained away. It's a perfect picture of God at one with us from the womb to the tomb.

There are other verses in the New Testament that hint at God's experience of suffering even before the creation of the world. In the Letter of Peter (1 Peter 1:29) and the Book of Revelation (13:8) we are told of "The Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world". It suggests that the reality of death and sacrifice was already real to God before the world came into being.

Some of you may be aware of Rublev's Icon. The three figures set around the table are taken to be the Holy Trinity. In the centre of the table is the lamb. I have sometimes imagined what the conversation might have been between the 3 persons of the Trinity as to which of them would offer to be the one to enter space and time and lay down their earthly life as the sacrificial lamb for humanity. Whatever passed between them "the lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world" shows, according to Bishop John V Taylor, that we live in a pre-forgiven universe. In other words, long before we sinned and even longer before we were created God had made provision for our forgiveness. Suffering was therefore a divine reality before the foundation of the world. This is an important truth to embrace. Perhaps it offers a clue to understanding why Jesus said "It behoves the Son of Man to suffer many things ....". If, as Christians believe, Jesus is the icon, the image, of the invisible God then it behoves him to present the fullest revelation of God which includes his suffering. The sufferings of Jesus are both iconic and redemptive. They express more fully the nature of God and they take away the sins of the world.

I omitted one other reference to “it behoves”. As Jesus drew close to his crucifixion he prepared to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. He told them “It behoves us to sacrifice the Passover Lamb”. Not only was he referring to the Passover meal he was also prefiguring his own sacrifice as the Lamb of God that would take away the sins of the world. But the moral and spiritual necessity lay in the fact that this act had been preordained before the foundation of the world. There was a divine necessity to his sacrifice and not only for the redemption of humanity but also for the liberation of creation that found itself in bondage to decay and death (Romans 8).

Suffering presents the believer with so many reasons to doubt. Pastorally, to say to someone who is suffering that God too knows what it is like to suffer bears very little value. Yet in my own ministry and life as a Christian there are three pictures or stories that have helped me to keep the faith.

- 1 The Earthquake
- 2 The crying child behind the wall
- 3 The Master Painter and Grandfather

In turn these three stories speak, firstly, of God’s intimate acquaintance with sorrow and grief; secondly, of the necessary silence of God when humanity suffers; thirdly, of the incorporating of all that we endure and suffer as both agents and victims into the sovereign purposes of God. They do not explain the origin of suffering, sin and evil. But they offer an insight into how the reality of suffering is integral to our existence.

Yet if there were a necessity to our Lord's suffering then equally there is a divine necessity to his triumphing through and over all that he endures.

"It behoves the Son of Man ... to rise again on the third day ..."  
and "It behoves the Christ ... to enter into his glory".

If the reality of suffering existed before the foundation of the world then we cannot say that it is only temporal and pertaining to this world only. But neither is it eternal for ultimately the Christian vision is of God coming to us to wipe away every tear from our eyes and promising that there will be no more dying, no more crying, no more grieving, no more pain. Jesus lived his life under this divine imperative. All his acts of justice and mercy, all his healings and exorcisms were intimations of this new world that was coming which would answer finally the prayer that he taught us to pray: "Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

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