

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY 28th OCTOBER

Good Morning

I was nine when the Today programme began.

There's a piece of news from those days that still haunts me.

In the last bulletin before 8 o'clock the announcer intoned that a prisoner who'd been sentenced to death would be hanged at 8am. Then just minutes later came the news that he'd been executed. I kept thinking: what if he's innocent? What fear he must be feeling on his way to the gallows. It was my first experience of the connection between news and empathy.

Sixty years ago was a different world. The history of Today is a history of our times capturing decades of debate.

Keeping pace with these shifting attitudes 'Thought for the Day' has gone from a four and half minute devotional talk to a two minute forty seconds 'Thought' about some aspect of current affairs seen through the eye of faith. Those eyes no longer belong exclusively to Christian and Jewish clerics but to a range of other religions. In 1992 the first Muslim joined the team of contributors, expressing and adding to our continuing cultural diversity that Monica (Ali) has just described.

To the surprise of many this millennium has seen religion become a major global force. Understanding faith is crucial to informing ourselves about how the world is changing.

'Thought for the Day' speaks into every corner of life especially when a disaster hits the headlines. Because it's live it can be re-written.

When there's a tragedy the audience needs time to absorb the shock. But you can't have silence on the radio. You have to still the turmoil with words that go beyond the factual, that touch the sinews of empathy.

I was once rung at six in the morning and told there'd been a serious crash on the M40. Young people from Stourbridge, returning from a concert in the Royal Albert Hall, had been killed in a blazing minibus. My new script was only a minute and a half. I told Brian Redhead who then took his time gently introducing it.

I talked about the parents waiting at the school gates and about the tears being shed in Stourbridge that morning, wondering aloud if the source of those tears was in the tear-filled eyes of God. For Christians believe in a God who weeps.

What I didn't know until after was that Brian Redhead's own son had been killed in a road accident.

There was compassion in his voice as he back-announced me.

Like the Today programme itself, here was a demanding, probing journalist giving space to empathy.

And when the news evokes empathy humanity is well served.

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE

