

The Thirtieth
ERIC SYMES ABBOTT
Memorial Lecture

BLESSED ARE THE HYPOCRITES?
SAYING SORRY IN A TELL-ALL AGE

delivered by

The Revd Lucy Winkett
Rector, St James's Church Piccadilly

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The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)

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Blessed are the Hypocrites?
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BLESSED ARE THE HYPOCRITES?

SAYING SORRY IN A TELL-ALL AGE

It is a great honour to be asked to give this lecture in such a series. Thank you for giving me the chance to think about this theme.

I have called this lecture “Blessed are the Hypocrites?”, and the question mark at the end is an important part of the title. Immediately following a General Election campaign, it might seem like a curious title. And more importantly for this context, it might seem like a blasphemous title, given that Jesus himself is recorded by Matthew as railing against the religious authorities of his day by saying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.” (Matthew 23.13)

It is, according to the teaching of Christ earlier in Matthew’s gospel, the poor, the pure in heart, the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness who are blessed. Not the hypocrites. I hope by the end of this short time to have addressed some of these initial objections, by route of what is inevitably a personal exploration of some of the themes I discern as a parish priest, as a Londoner, as a jobbing theologian.

It’s a commonplace to say it, but I suppose I have, especially in the past three or four years, reflected again in the city centre context of St James’s Piccadilly that the message and insights of the Christian tradition are profoundly counter-cultural in modern urban Britain. For the purposes of this lecture, even though the language of sin, confession, guilt and forgiveness are everywhere in contemporary culture, my contention is that the gap has never arguably been wider between what Christian theology says about these things and the traction these ideas have in our society, even and especially in what I want to suggest is a peculiarly confessional age.

Confession is big business. As family relationships are laid bare for daytime TV audiences, and mock courtrooms try real cases for entertainment, the language of wrongdoing, and demands for apologies are part of our daily public conversation.

I want to say quickly that this is not a lecture that wants to suggest that accountability

is not appropriate for those who hold political, economic, legal power. But this set of reflections rests on the premise that just as influential on the way we live now as our legal, political and economic arrangements, are the myths we tell ourselves, the stories that persist in our cultural imagination and the hard-to-define, more intangible assumptions we make about who we are now and who we want to be.

And so the set of questions that I've been thinking about are those such as: In a secularised context, what can the Church say about the Christian understanding of sin, and requirement for repentance and mercy? Is the quest for purity as damaging as it is noble? Do our public conversations confuse sincerity with truth? And is there any such thing as innocence?

Some pastoral stories to start with

So my starting point is as a pastor in a church which gathers its congregation from around London and beyond, and is located at the centre of one of the most diverse and lively cities in the world, the capital city of the UK, close to the seat of political power in the borough of Westminster, and right at the crossroads between the eye-wateringly rich residents of Mayfair and St James's and the significant destitution and despair of the homeless, mostly men, who come to our building every day looking for rest.

I reflect often that there is a constituency of people, mostly men, who have more money than they can possibly need, who work in the private equity firms of Jermyn Street and St James's but who have no time. I was speaking recently to a man who runs an exclusive dating agency a couple of streets away from the church. I asked him how he matched up his clients for the substantial monthly fee he was charging. The first question he asks any new client, he said, was whether the person did anything for themselves – go to the gym, go to the pub, eat out. For many of his clients, they didn't do much of this – and so he wouldn't take them on. If they don't have time for themselves, they won't have time for someone else. For these people, relationships will not work, because paid work is everything, the iPhone is on all through the holiday. Conversely, our pews each day are full of people who have nothing but time. After a night spent surviving the often violent streets of Soho or Piccadilly, they arrive exhausted at 8am, and by 8.30am are unconscious.

And in this context, our congregation come from all over London and beyond and are people for whom going to church is not at all an expected thing to do – quite the opposite. These are often people who haven't grown up with organised religion, who certainly don't have a background in Anglican practice and at the same time are people who want to find a way to live their faith in their daily lives – at work, at home, in their

leisure and in their desire to make the world a better place.

One of the main threads of impetus for this set of reflections is that I have found myself recently in a variety of situations as a priest and public representative of the Church, in conversation with constituencies and audiences whose assumptions and language are very different from anything that would be recognisably Christian. And while this isn't necessarily unusual, these personal experiences have given focus to more general reflections.

At the Groucho Club as part of a GQ magazine event, in front of an audience full of, well, mostly vodka tonics, I found myself on a panel of women journalists, entrepreneurs and business executives discussing the place of women in public life. Another public discussion involved advertising executives and two stand-up comedians in conversation with the church, and then again with entrepreneurs and banking staff at HSBC Private bank the day after the regulator had censured them. Later that day I was at a reinsurance company in the City of London, QBE, perched on a high stool, sandwiched between two rugby posts and huge pictures of the England Rugby Union team they sponsor.

At these panel discussions, where a range of topics were discussed, it became apparent to me that we were somehow trying to speak about the signs of the times in front of a relatively young professional audience. It also became clear that many of the underlying assumptions that framed our discussion would be profoundly challenging to a Christian approach to such questions. Whether the church was thought to have anything to say about the practice of insurance, advertising, the relative roles of women and men in the public square was entirely unclear. The safer ground and more accepted commentary is when the church speaks about either its own institutional life (say, women bishops, same sex marriage, disinvesting from coal) as one institution among others, or in a philosophical defence of its own right to speak at all in a multi-faith society. These two strands of comment are accepted, and well worn: either the church talking to itself, overheard by society, or the church talking about itself to its neighbours about mutual challenges of organisation or viability.

But the question I want to try to ask is different. In a multi-faith context, what are the distinctively Christian reflections that can be expressed for the common good, that are not just restricted to those who practice Christian rituals or believe Christian things?

In the public exchanges I described, the church's contribution was thought either to be quaintly irrelevant or easily demolished. How does the church avoid being coopted into

a set of assumptions that more is better, that bigger is more, that commercial imperatives are irresistible, and frankly the only grown up way to behave is to join in? Or joining in an assumption that human creative energy is best employed in the focus solely on the bottom line, and the formation through social media of a self-serving, self-promoting public image.

One striking exchange was in a seminar involving priests and advertising executives. A priest said that he hated advertising because it made you feel bad about something you didn't know you had to feel bad about – and then it tried to sell you the solution. Advertising, he said, created the need, then made money out of the customer's discomfort and desire to fulfil that need. Quick as a flash, the ad guy replied: that's exactly what the church does; implants in your psyche the sin you didn't think you were guilty of, and then tries to sell you the solution – salvation by Jesus.

But it was at the Groucho Club that I encountered the final impetus for this set of reflections. I had spent perhaps 10 minutes having lively conversation with one of the delegates there before I realised through the dark of the club that it was the former Apprentice contestant and now Sun columnist and LBC “shock jock” Katie Hopkins. So my interest was aroused when in April this year, a furious row broke out in the press, started by Katie Hopkins' intentionally controversial and universally criticised comment that the migrants struggling across the Mediterranean to a new life in Europe were “like cockroaches” (*The Sun*, 17 April 2015). In her column a couple of days later, Zoe Williams wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper as a counter to Katie Hopkins. She reflected on the other side of the equation; the expression not of callousness but compassion. She wrote, “Compassion is such a rich part of the human experience and yet such a shaming thing to express, because you will always fall short of what your own words demand from you. You will never do enough. It makes you wonder how the concept of human rights was ever born. How did anybody ever overcome the knowledge of their own failings for long enough to establish universal principles that they knew they would probably never do enough to propagate?” (*The Guardian*, 20 April 2015).

And then, Russell Brand weighed in and said that people shouldn't abuse Katie Hopkins for what she said (it had been reported that she had a panic button installed in her home such is the level of abuse she routinely receives) but that we the public should have compassion for her as she is clearly in a lot of pain, which he understands as he has “been there”.

In the middle of all this furore, people were and are still drowning as they try to reach Europe in the hope of a better life. But buried in this public exchange is a reflection

about the gap between the compassion we might want to express with our words and the action we might take in our lives. The link between compassion and shame is close, because we will never do enough, never make it right; so it's safer not to try.

And this perspective was expressed too by the environmental campaigner George Monbiot who, when challenged about humanity's collective will really to do any more than change the light bulbs, reflected that he would rather be accused of hypocrisy than cynicism. He would rather put his head above the parapet, take a risk and try, rather than rest in the safer territory of risk averse cynicism. In this area of confession, repentance and sin, the choice between hypocrite and cynic seems to be touching on a distinctly Christian strand of teaching, more of which later. And perhaps the cost of expressing compassion is risking shame.

Working definitions

That there is a disconnect between the theological language of confession, repentance, redemption and sin; that there is a disconnect between this and the usual use of these concepts in public conversations goes, to the heart of the discussion tonight. For Christians, sin is the expression of the fractured nature of humanity's connection with God, and the fractured nature of human relationships too. Sin is a way of talking about the separateness, the as-yet-unrepaired bond between the Creator and the created that humans recognise often in an unasked for yearning. This yearning comes unannounced, in the presence of great art, or on a clifftop, when we're in love or even in church; that things should be better or we should be kinder or everything should be more peaceful somehow or the world could be better. This often inarticulate yearning, combined with the frustration of living with things as they are, is also what I want to talk about a little tonight: living in the gap.

I want to suggest that this gap we know about, and live in, is called hypocrisy by a risk-averse version of secularism that has abandoned belief, let alone trust in a loving God, and so fears the small deaths of shame and isolation that remind us of the last death we will inevitably know; the death of our body and the end of our life. This is not to say that Christians are any better either. This fear is rife within Christianity too; a functional atheism that acts either as if God is not here, or assumes God is either too far away or, conversely, too like us to be trusted with our deepest desires and bravest intentions. My contention therefore is that our theology of God, either spoken about in Christian conversations or unspoken in public discourse, is at the heart of this. Because without a theology of God bracing enough, robust enough to deal with our fundamentally fractured lives, living in this gap is simply intolerable. And so we arrive at a hyperbolic, fearful scapegoating of those parts of ourselves or others we condemn.

Cultural confession

In successive General Election campaigns, a seemingly inexorable development is that of the selling of the personality of the leader. Even here in a Parliamentary democracy where a population votes for the programme of a party not the promises of a president, the public values given most weight in the assessment of respect, are personal experience, personal empathy and sincerity. Do they mean it? What's their story?

In this context, there are obviously certain expressions of collective Christianity, emphasising personal experience, emotional engagement and sincerity of private expression, which chime with this zeitgeist and are flourishing accordingly. It is in the area, traditionally held by the church, of confession, absolution, repentance and renewal of life that there is a counter cultural message that Christianity might have to offer.

Can we discern in the huge popularity of Jeremy Kyle, Judge Judy (now in its 19th season and booked through till 2020), and the recently launched UK version Judge Rinder (August 2014) – where real life cases are brought before a barrister for entertainment – a confessional society indulging its taste for public apology and atonement? Are these shows closer to a public confessional of personal notions of sin or the humiliating punishment of the stocks?

Can we discern (for all the counter cultural growth in London's churches), in the declining attendance at churches in the UK, a failure on behalf of organised Christianity to capture this innate need for confession and forgiveness? Conversely, in other parts of the church, to have put such a high emphasis on a personal version of sin that many have turned away.

The narrative in the confessional TV shows is more akin to a version of the American dream: whoever you are, you can make the most of yourself. There is no morality attached to ontology; white, brown, black, gay, trans; self-actualisation, self-fulfilment is the aim of life, even if it is at the expense of another person. Personal responsibility is heavily emphasised, the desire for revenge accepted and the most ferocious audience reaction reserved for any whiff of duplicity. Rather beautiful hopes and dreams are sometimes expressed in amidst all the shouting; to try to do right by a child, to try to make up a broken relationship with a sibling, to confront an addiction, to find love and so on. But there is little room for ambiguity, confusion, uncertainty or fragility. What is billed as tough love often turns into a merciless shrieking rage, which most of us might recognise buried in ourselves but rarely allow out in public.

Faced with the complexities of life, and the messes we might all get ourselves into, I

sometimes reflect that in the Church of England today, I think it's still possible to discern the competing sides in the English Civil War on whose battle fields arguably the Anglican identity was forged. You will know the famous description by the satirist HL Menckel of Puritanism, 'the haunting fear that someone somewhere is having a good time'. The Roundheads among us insist on the quest for purity; metaphorically shutting the theatres and banning the horse racing, or at least feeling bad about the bets they might make. There is the Jesus of Reza Aslan's 2014 book *Zealot*. Jesus who overturns the tables in the Temple courtyard; the one who rails against the whited sepulchres; the one whose aim is to purify corruption wherever he sees it.

Relax say the Cavaliers, claiming Jesus for their own, and quoting his contemporary critics with glee, who accuse him of eating and drinking with sinners. Unlike his ascetic cousin John, wherever Jesus is, there's a party, they insist: he spent all his time with the wrong people having the wrong sort of good time.

And before we start to talk about confession or repentance, it is an obvious reflection that in the church we are fairly polarised over the language of sin. For example, the church I currently serve is full of people who have been terribly, sometimes indelibly hurt by the language of sin, especially in debates about human sexuality and its expression. For the LGBT members of our congregations, sometimes they have commented the bar is pretty low in terms of their expectations in church: the most they can hope for is that the preacher won't say something devastating. Desperate for some safe space, it's not surprising – although not in the end sustainable - that some liberal churches have jettisoned any serious discussion of the language of sin because it has been so violently misused in the past.

It's also important and obvious to say that "Church" is not separate from "society". It's an urgent question which the gathered worshipping communities on Sundays face: how to equip what can be called the dispersed church who are working today in the NHS, in an office, cleaning a street, trying to develop a startup, moving money from currency to currency on the stock exchange, selling souvenirs on London's streets, surviving in a hostel for homeless people. What is the language about sin and forgiveness used on a Sunday in the gathered church that can be lived by the dispersed church on a Wednesday? This practical question raises a more fundamental question about not just ethics but our theology of God.

Mind the gap

Christianity is a religion orientated towards the future, despite our central liturgical act being one of remembrance. Christians live in the gap between now and not yet. We live

in the world as it is, with us as we are, and we know that the ministry of Jesus, reflected in the life of the church now, is to proclaim the kingdom, the hope that is to come, that is within us, upon us, the future we can hardly imagine, while living in the reality of the unendedness of this life.

We also find ourselves living in the gap between the person we know we are and the person we want to be. The person we know we are and the person everyone else tells us we are. The person we thought we would be by now and so on and so on...

And we collect the evidence for the person that we actually are, rather than the person we'd like to be, from our life lived in time. How we deal with our past, personal and collective, is a huge question and one that often causes anxiety and strain. Daring to contemplate the past is obviously essential work in the cycle of confession, repentance, restoration. We can't change the past we have lived, or within that, the wrong we have done: we are powerless to change it and so we must deal with it another way. Without this fundamental recognition of our powerlessness, we are caught in a pattern, like the man at the pool at Bethesda (John 5), of repetitive futile attempts to move ourselves while blaming everyone else for not releasing us. Like him, this can last for 38 years or, to coin a phrase, 30 times 38.

If there is a hysterical or overly punitive atmosphere around wrongdoing, it can be an indication that we have lost our perspective on the movement of time itself. Sound and fury, expressed in the present, can sometimes be an expression of powerlessness, the howl of rage that what's done is done with no mechanism at our disposal to be set free. As a pastoral reality, this is something that most of us will experience at some time, when we are dealing with the hurts of our past, and is a necessary process, one towards which we should obviously show the greatest compassion, to ourselves and to others. The point I'm making is that if this is where we remain, it indicates something about our trappedness in a painful present, which has not reckoned properly with the wrongs of the past.

In his book on what he identifies as a "graceless age", Miroslav Volf comments, "We can only do new deeds not undo the old ones".¹

Or more pithily put by the New York Times columnist and writer of spiritual best sellers

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge* (Zondervan, 2005), p. 128

Anne Lamott, “there are three things I cannot change – the past, the truth and you.”²

Rowan Williams makes the same point, “There is no alchemy that can be relied upon; whatever is said, the past remains violently, itself, a foreign country indeed.”³

These are hard truths to accept and so we reduce the parameters, cut the canvass to a size our imaginations can deal with. And in the process, we domesticate the eternal God, who could help us with this interpretation of time, and we reduce our image of God to something we can more easily deal with.

Our often unacknowledged images of God

One writer who has been hugely influential in this area was the Jesuit priest and writer Gerry Hughes, who died last year. With his death, interest has been revived in his insights into Christian spirituality.

He was convinced that the picture we carry around of God affects not only how we believe, but how we pray – whether we *want* to pray – and how faith ‘feels’, intuitively which in turn affects the way we live. He once produced a kind of ‘identikit’ picture of God called “good old *Uncle George*”, based on how, in his experience, God had been communicated to people who *had* given up on Christianity and walked away:

“God was a family relative, much admired by Mum and Dad, who described him as very loving, a great friend of the family, very powerful and interested in all of us. Eventually we are taken to visit ‘good old Uncle George’. He lives in a formidable mansion, is bearded, gruff, and threatening. We cannot share our parents’ admiration for him. At the end of the visit, Uncle George turns to address us. ‘Now listen, dear,’ he begins, looking very severe, ‘I want to see you here once a week, and if you fail to come, let me just show you what will happen to you.’ He then leads us down to the mansion’s basement. It is dark, becomes hotter and hotter as we descend, and we begin to hear unearthly screams. In the basement there are steel doors. Uncle George opens one. ‘Now look in there, dear,’ he says. We see a nightmare vision, an array of blazing furnaces with little demons in attendance, who hurl into the blaze those men, women, and children who failed to visit Uncle George or to act in a way he approved. ‘And if you don’t visit me, dear, that is where you will most certainly go,’ says Uncle George. He

² Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow: the Three Essential Prayers* (Garamond Press, 2013).

³ Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (T&T Clark, 2000), p. 108.

then takes us upstairs again to meet Mum and Dad.

“As we go home, tightly clutching Dad with one hand and Mum with the other, Mum leans over us and says, ‘And now don’t you love Uncle George with all your heart and soul, mind and strength?’ And we say ‘Yes, I do,’ because to say anything else would be to join the queue at the furnace. At a tender age deep conflict has set in and we keep telling Uncle George how much we love him and how good he is and that we want to do only what pleases him. We observe what we are told are his wishes and dare not admit, even to ourselves, that we loathe him”.⁴

Uncle George is a caricature, but a caricature of a truth, the truth that we often construct a God who is in fact an image of our tyrannical selves. Hell-fire sermons are out of fashion at the moment, but they were in fashion a few decades ago, they’re in fashion in many places in the world and they may well come in here again. Such sermons have a great appeal to certain unhealthy types of mind, but they cause havoc with the more healthy and sensitive. The *Uncle George* kind of God is a God that lots of people don’t believe in: the wrathful vengeful God who needs to be appeased by a blood sacrifice to atone for all the sins of the people.

Uncle George comes from our inability when we read Scripture, when we pray, when we think about God at all – our inability to do anything but anthropomorphise God. We imagine, as I mentioned, that when we’re dealing with God, we’re dealing with someone essentially like us, only bigger. *We* know about wrath: anger, fury, violence, jealousy; the alarming feelings that we have. And we imagine therefore that *God’s* wrath is like that, only bigger - which makes it even more violent and more frightening.

And we end up with something like *Uncle George*.

But critically, one of the most important things Christian theology wants to say about God is that God emphatically *isn’t* like us only bigger. God is *unlike*: is other, free – disconcertingly so – utterly holy, completely undefended: the Creator completely surrendered to relationship with creation.

In the story of Jesus’s arrest, crucifixion and resurrection, the God we encounter is God so completely yielded up to the risks of relationship that we can hardly look, let alone understand. And you and I know, because we’re human, that this is *not* what I’m like. For us, in relationship, there’s always something held back, something competitive,

⁴ Gerard Hughes, *God of Surprises* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985).

something defended and suspicious and afraid, which comes between me and my maker, and me and my neighbour.

But in the light of what we know we're like, to speak of God's action in Christ as some kind of feeling that God entertains towards us is to mistake it completely. I want to suggest that our instinct for confession, absolution, forgiveness, our often buried understanding of ourselves as flawed and dependent on one another and on God, reveals our own creaturely acknowledgement of the unimaginably deep divine dis-content of our Creator with who or what we have made ourselves. The crucifixion of Christ expresses the salvation of the world in this dissonant acknowledgement of sin. Any attempts to describe a God who demands sacrifice for sin, even the sacrifice of what is most precious, is an attempt at language to express divine dis-ease, divine dissonance, agony, fury even, at the profligate waste and widening injustices of a violent, risk averse and small-minded humanity who bury our gifts in the sand to hide them and keep them safe.

One of our problems is that we have so often formulated God's relationship to us in the language of Uncle George that we have jettisoned the notion altogether of a God who is utterly other or resolutely strange. And along with it, for some sections of Christian community, the notion of sin has been jettisoned too. This leaves us much poorer spiritually and I want to suggest too, leaves us with an equally damaging sort of faith – just as damaging as the Uncle George fantasy – which is what you might call a Great Agony-Aunt kind of God: an 'I'm ok, you're ok' kind of a God. This kind of God can do no more for me than stroke the bruised parts of my ego, can't help me with the damage I do to myself and others. This God, disastrously, simply leaves me as I am – and us as we are, and it as it is... This kind of God is just as damaging a fantasy because this domesticated God does nothing to challenge our preference for safety to trust, our preference for illusion to truth, and is a God we can recruit to our own programmes and prejudices instead of the God who sets us free.

While this kind of theological reflection might seem a little esoteric, even disconnected to the confessional TV shows I was mentioning earlier, the consequences of living under the shadow of these competing Gods can be thoroughly practical in terms of how we live now. If the punitive God has colonised our imagination, we are more likely, like the unforgiving slaves in Jesus's parable, to act cruelly, judgementally towards those parts of ourselves and therefore others, who are afraid of hell.

If the Agony Aunt God has settled in our minds, without any recognition of the need for change, then we can become permanent victims, with our identity shaped, as Rowan

Williams has it, as “... a self whose status has been determined by the acts of others; at best it is asking for the possibility of action and self-determination, at worst it is bound to the role of passive innocent, perhaps intensifying it by the refusal of anything less than total reparation, which is always inaccessible, since our history cannot simply be either unravelled or halted.”⁵

Our image of God – the one that we don’t admit to, whatever our liturgical language, the one even we don’t believe in but the one we realise we live by – our image of God is immensely powerful in determining how we view our own inevitable hypocrisy and the inevitable hypocrisy of others. And the view we have of our past; the admission of our own powerlessness except in the present, our fundamental attitude towards life in time, also has agency here. The truth is that we move from victim to perpetrator as easily as putting one foot in front of another.

The delusion of false innocence

The 19th century philosopher Nietzsche declared that *to live is to be unjust*. Our lives are irretrievably full of petty daily injustices and cruelties.

If our image of God is as one who is implacable, who judges us without mercy, we live with this knowledge in a state of constant fear of punishment or resentment that somehow God demands far too much of us – that God is being unrealistic with us if God expects us to live justly all the time. We, in tiny wilful ways, simply turn away. Like compulsively turning the channel over on the TV, we become addicted to distraction. Anywhere else but here. Anyone else but me. Along with Martin Luther, we will find that our hearts begin to “tremble and fidget”⁶ and our lives are lived in permanent fear.

On the other hand, as Miroslav Volf would have it, a Santa Claus God who gives out presents, who affirms us as God’s favourites, leads us to believe that if only we could strip ourselves back, remove all the cultural and psychological influences on us, get back to our “core”, we would find pure goodness.⁷ Our lives are lived in permanent anxiety and the search for approval.

A philosopher who has reflected deeply on these characterisations of ourselves as either permanent perpetrator or permanent victim is Gillian Rose. In her reflections on what

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (T&T Clark, 2000), p. 117.

⁶ Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 133.

⁷ See Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 134ff.

she coined as the “unmendedness” of the world, especially as evidenced in the Holocaust, she challenges her readers to resist the easy characterization of ourselves as somehow neutral observers of a horrible historical evil. This is, she argued, to rescue ourselves, to excuse ourselves from what has to be in the end a deeper acceptance of our own complicity. She wrote this for example about the process of observation and involvement: “In a nature film, we could be made to identify with the life cycle of the fly as prey of the spider, and we could be made to identify with the life cycle of the spider as prey of the rodent. We can be made to identify with the Peking Opera singer who is destroyed by the Cultural Revolution and we can equally be made to identify with the rickshaw man, for whom the Cultural Revolution was the ‘beginning of paradise’. It is only the ultimate predator whose sympathies can be so promiscuously enlisted.”⁸

She is making a profound statement about human nature. That human beings have the capacity to be what she calls the *ultimate predator* – able to be drawn in to identify with every predator, and every victim depending on the level of what she identified as propaganda, the persuasive power of art. She makes a distinction between *sentimental predators* – that we can rather cozily identify with – and the real capacity we have as *ultimate predators* for collusion, deception, complicity.

Gillian Rose commends one particular memoir of a Polish inmate of Auschwitz, “He writes from a clear ethical presupposition – that Auschwitz is an expression of evil – but he somehow represents himself both as executioner and victim. He makes you witness brutality in the most disturbing way, for it is not clear...from what position, as whom, you are reading. You emerge shaking in horror at yourself with yourself in question, not in admiration for the author’s Olympian serenity”.⁹

What Gillian Rose says to 20th century Europeans is bracing. She argues that it is easy to develop a solidarity between those who think that deep down they are innocent of the world’s wrongs. She argues not for a solidarity of the falsely innocent but what is called by one of her interpreters, *the solidarity of the shaken*;¹⁰ a solidarity that comes from being made acutely aware of the suffering in the world, but also convicted of our own personal complicity in it.

She is trying to find a way of building solidarity and community that is free from what

⁸ Quoted in Andrew Shanks, *Against Innocence* (SCM Press, 2008), p. 24.

⁹ Quoted in Shanks, *Against Innocence*, p. 25.

¹⁰ Shanks, *Against Innocence*, p. 28.

she identifies as propaganda. The only way to avoid propaganda, she suggests, is honest prayer in which we are confronted with another reality, a depth before which we are contemplative, a depth of reality that remains, despite our attempts to domesticate it, strange to us. It is only this kind of religion that can ultimately dissolve the towering totalitarian certainties of fascism. Our faith is partly there to “shake us out of our delusions of uninvolved innocence.”¹¹

Or as Rowan Williams puts it similarly: What is fundamentally required is “the relinquishing of an identity that admits not simple guilt (in the present) but the manifold ways in which we are real in the language and narrative of others rather than in a privately scripted and controlled story.”¹²

Every year, on the United Nations Day of Remembrance for Road Crash Victims, at St James’s we hold a service. It is London’s service for the charity Roadpeace. Borough Mayors attend, representatives of the emergency services, the police choir sings. Ministers of the Crown come and speak about policy and campaigners come to ensure that the language is right; not Road Traffic Accidents (some of them are not accidents) but Road Traffic Collisions. The service most importantly holds the congregation, all of whom have lost a family member or friend on the roads in the last year. It is a service where raw emotions of anger, grief, despair and fury are expressed at the futility of the crash that killed the one they loved, and the often complicated aftermath where blame is too often attributed to the one who is dead.

As the names are read out, with their ages very often very young, the personalities of the ones who have gone come to life: “he loved basketball” his mother says – “he did wait for the green man before he crossed but the driver was texting at the time”. The haunted faces of relatives conjure up for the rest of us the precious memories of the life lived even while they struggle with the knowledge of the violence of how they died.

But I have also wondered about yet another circle of people who are not there but whose lives are intimately bound by the events brought before God that day. The drivers – the perpetrators – the ones whose inattention ruined the lives of so many in ending the life of one. The ones whose sometimes wilful speeding or culpable negligence meant that they too now live with a life sentence. In their case, it is of memories of the moment they moved from delivery driver making a living to the man who killed the cyclist on the Bow roundabout. Forever guilty. Forever condemned.

¹¹ Shanks, *Against Innocence*, p. 27.

¹² Williams, *Lost Icons*, p. 111.

I have sometimes wondered, given that church is a natural place to bring our grief and greed and guilt, what a liturgy would look like for all the people who had killed someone on the road?

The ubiquitous and ordinary use of the roads is a useful metaphor for what I am trying to say about the multiple identities with which we live as hypocrites, cynics, purists, victims, perpetrators.

In our common use of the roads, a cyclist easily becomes a driver on a different day, and all drivers are at some time pedestrians. A police officer becomes a driver, a medic becomes a cyclist. At one point in time, we assume these identities and in the event of a catastrophe like a crash, our identities are fixed. Victim, perpetrator, helper, bystander. But we move all the time between these roles – on the roads as in life.

Recognising this truth, that our identities are not fixed as perpetrators or victims might help us cultivate compassion towards ourselves and others and help us live with the gap between the person we are and the person we want to be. And also to recognise that the only gaze which falls on all of these identities, the only gaze that contemplates us wholly, is that of God.

How to live in the gap?

It may be true to say that one of the ways that we live with the gap between what life is like and what we think it could be is to weaken the ethic by which we live so that the gap itself is narrower?

For the Christian, the immensely demanding “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and Love your neighbor” gets expressed in the more contractual “do to others as you would have them do to you”. Or even better, more like the Hypocratic “do no harm”. Live and let live.

In conversation with a probation officer recently, she surprised me by saying that she didn't think that showing remorse was either necessary or even desirable in her clients, most of whom had committed serious offences and were in prison for long sentences. Remorse, she said – one way of dealing with the gap – was more often used as a way of avoiding what had happened in the past. Expressing remorse didn't automatically lead, in fact rarely led she said, to repentance. The expression of remorse could actually operate as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo of fundamental avoidance and even denial. Once remorse is expressed, she argued, it rarely energises an individual to an actual change of life; rather its expression is sometimes felt to be enough of an action

in itself to warrant forgiveness or release.

Living with the gap from a Christian perspective is living in a state of constantly deepening trust in the God who inexplicably and outrageously deals with our consistent injustices both to ourselves, and to others in ways that are entirely mysterious to us but which feel close to liberty, and redemption, and, somehow being found.

Forgiveness

Finally a word or two about forgiveness. In his book *Healing Agony*,¹³ Stephen Cherry identifies forgiveness not as an overarching ethical imperative nor even as an act in itself, but as a long running story, a process. And that the spiritual task is not to pray for the ability to forgive as if it were somehow something we could win a prize for, but to pray for a shaping of our hearts to be themselves forgiving.

Ernest Hemingway began one of his short stories, ‘The Capital of the World’, with this story: “Madrid is full of boys names Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called out to disperse the 800 young men who answered the advertisement.”¹⁴

The primary point of course is the joke about the number of boys named Paco – but the success of the joke depends on the common, even ubiquitous need for forgiveness, perhaps particularly within families but certainly from Dad?

One place to start here is with the desert teaching of John the Dwarf who rather counter intuitively said, “We have put aside the easy burden, which is self-accusation, and weighed ourselves down the heavy one, self-justification.”

Rowan Williams explains: “Self-justification is the heavy burden because there is no end to carrying it; there will always be some new situation where we need to establish our position, dig the trench for the ego to defend.”¹⁵

¹³ Stephen Cherry, *Healing Agony: reimagining forgiveness* (Continuum, 2012).

¹⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *‘The Capital of the World’: The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1987), p. 29.

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honeycakes* (Lion Books, 2004), p. 48.

The self-accusation burden is light because it is carried in the fundamental knowledge that all has already been known and held in the gaze of the infinite mercy of God. The light that shines into the darkest recesses of our psyches and hearts is not the merciless searchlight of Uncle George, nor is it the Piccadilly Circus kind of light that draws attention only to itself, but is the kind of light that makes artists go the moors at dawn: light that illuminates in compassion, the failures we know and recognise and despair of when we are alone.

For Miraslav Volf, to be forgiven is two things; to receive both the accusation and the release from debt. How do we receive the accusation? By confessing and repenting. How do we receive the forgiveness? By believing in trust that we are forgiven and able to rejoice in the generous gift of this release.¹⁶

One of the tragedies of handling this powerful and sometimes toxic dynamic of sin confessed and forgiven is articulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his contemplation of life in Christian community. His rather acerbic observation is that the church is pretty bad at this, despite all its protestations to the contrary: “The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy.”¹⁷

Sin confessed can be forgiven – but what Luther called sin “defended” can’t be forgiven. Therefore, often I am not aware of my sin and my hypocrisy. Despite my best efforts to find it all and name it all, it is resolutely hidden from me. It can be seen by others, and can be seen by God. But how we live with this knowledge highlights the importance of our assumptions about who God is and what God is like. And so we return to the importance of the character of that God who is seeing what we can’t see. This knowledge can paralyse us with fear or leave us feeling self-righteously permanent victims, depending helplessly on a version of God we say we don’t believe in but in truth approach in trepidation on a Sunday.

The familiar Christian ethic taught by Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan and enshrined in the summary of the law, is to be a neighbour: to be a neighbour, yes to the stranger in need who was on the road to Jericho but also to be a neighbour to your partner, your child, your parent. To be a neighbour even to yourself – the bleeding, left-

¹⁶ Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 153.

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (SCM Press, 1954), p. 87.

for-dead part of yourself that your more judgemental self hurries past in order to get on with your life. Recognising this sort of hypocrisy; the gap between the one who lies broken and the one who hurries past as different aspects of our spiritual selves is to give ourselves a good chance of closing it.

We can't really be content with anything like learning to "love" the gap – or ultimately accepting its permanent presence in our lives – that would be a complacent misuse of the compassion towards ourselves that I am suggesting. And so we are asked to live at some level always restless, the yearning that I mentioned at the beginning. But the operation of a forgiving heart can help here.

Stephen Cherry puts the teaching of John the Dwarf into a contemporary context. In describing an insight from Marian Partington, whose sister Lucy was one of the victims of Fred and Rosemary West, he comments, "The boundaries between 'good me' and 'evil them' begin to be broken down. It was in the depths of disorientating rage that Marian Partington began to allow herself to identify with the very people who had mistreated and murdered her sister. ... I'm learning how to forgive myself, and I'm learning to believe that others can forgive me. In this process I've explored my own rotting pile of mistakes, but I also see that it's my compost. It has meaning. It doesn't have to remain repulsive, something I can't acknowledge, something I want to edit out. It is actually part of who I am, and I have to develop another relationship with it."¹⁸

Somehow, Marian Partington has found a way to express the multiple identities we all hold together, including those of victim and perpetrator to such a deep extent that she can even begin to explore the possibility of forgiveness in relation to what happened to her sister Lucy. This is a despatch from the front line of the struggle for forgiveness and as such is worth deep reflection and respect from the rest of us.

Conclusion

In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, a cross dressing Portia makes one of the most poignant and eloquent speeches of all. Having declared that the quality of mercy is not strained, but is more like rain that falls on the earth, she comments too that:

in the course of justice, none of us
should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;

¹⁸ Marian Partington, quoted in David Self, *Struggling with Forgiveness* (Path Books, 2003).

And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
the deeds of mercy.¹⁹

One of the ways in which to live with the gap between as St Paul would have it, the good that I would do that I cannot do, is to fill it with prayers for mercy which in turn will make us merciful. Knowing about our own hypocrisy, acknowledging it, contemplating it, cultivates, in the right light, a deep sort of compassion that neither excuses nor rests in cynicism, but persuades us that something like a hopeful self-accusation can begin the journey to freedom.

A Christian intervention in a brittle and hyperbolic public atmosphere, recognising the often merciless expressions of cultural confession with which we are surrounded, will speak about ancient themes such as self-accusation, repentance and restoration. Also, in a highly risk averse secularised public conversation, where fear of approbation, accusations of hypocrisy, the greatest sin in a transparent world, will easily smother desires to make the world a better place, the church can make a God-centred contribution that encourages risk-taking in an atmosphere of forgiveness, that promotes a spirit of adventure in local communities and national debate; and a fearless hospitality for every human soul we encounter at the crossroads where, we learn in the Book of Proverbs (chapter 8), Wisdom is to be found.

And how to offer this perspective in wider society? How to prevent these considerations remaining, as often these conversations are, the church talking to itself? With such profound issues, it's important to recognise that the Christian community, as it develops and grows, learns not a list but a language. We are people of the Way, we walk the path of discipleship, talking as we go. We read Scripture, as one theologian would have it, with our feet as well as our eyes and our brains. The most effective way to communicate this, to offer this perspective, is to live it; as individuals in the workplace and as confessional communities where just action is expected, where prayer is indispensable, and where the anticipation of God's forgiveness encourages our own risk-taking combatting our fear of approbation.

We live this, daily accepting the irresistible invitation of a God who is scandalously forgiving, utterly and irreducibly strange whose light reveals the deep fractures of human life, honouring our yearning to be healed.

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV scene I lines 199-202.