

**'Faiths in conflict and harmony in the 21st century:
reconciling religious identity with the pursuit of peace'**

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by

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Introduction: the seriousness of the hour

It is a great honour to be invited to give the first Stansted Park Lecture and it is a joy to be able to see the House that played a significant part in Lewis Way's vision for the world and the world to come. I am very conscious that the title I have been given – 'Faiths in conflict and harmony in the 21st century: reconciling religious identity with the pursuit of peace' – is not only relevant to the grand scheme that so inspired Lewis Way in the nineteenth century, but is also deeply pertinent to the political realities of the present day across the globe, no more so than in the Middle East among the lands that preoccupied Mr Way. The Shia-Sunni divide within Islam has fractured the whole region. Different countries are lined up on either side and, nations themselves are split across the same divide, to violent effect. Casting its shadow throughout the Middle East and much further afield is the tension between Muslims and Jews, a tension which, as between Shias and Sunnis is taut with rival claims to land and political power. We know too well that these conflicts are far from being localized disputes. They are matters of world concern that not only affect the internal stability of every land where Muslims or Jews can be found, but also embrace the major powers of the world in their dealings with each other. The events on the world stage following the Syrian chemical attack in August have been likened to the instabilities in the Balkans that, through a series of chain reactions, drew Europe into World War One almost exactly one hundred years ago. The scenarios are, of course, very different, but the potential of the Middle East to plunge other nations into a descending spiral of violence is not to be underestimated.

My contribution this morning to these matters of almost overwhelming complexity is very small. I have four sets of reflections that, although rather disconnected in appearance, are held together by common themes. The first set of thoughts revolve around the remarkable figure of Lewis Day and, as his charming biography by Stanley and Munro Price puts it, his *extraordinary journey*.¹

Lewis Way

Lewis Day was a committed evangelical Anglican. He was closely connected to a group of other nineteenth century evangelicals who did a great deal of good for this country and, indeed, the world. He was committed to the well-being – the eternal well-being – of the Jewish people. Captivated by St Paul’s teaching in chapters 9-11 of his letter to the Romans that ‘all Israel will be saved’ (Romans 11.25), Day gave his life and wealth to aiding the purposes of God. Convinced that Israel’s salvation was a necessary prelude to the *parousia* (the second coming of Christ), Way worked tirelessly for the conversion of Jewish people. His methods were both personal and political, deeply rooted in Christian principles of compassion and responsibility for the other. He campaigned for ‘personal kindness’ and social respect to be shown to Jews. After centuries of discrimination and, at times, persecution, he called the leaders of Europe, gathered for the Congress of Vienna in 1814, to grant ‘this distressed people . . . civil and political freedom – an entrance into the great family of Society’². As well as social emancipation in Europe, Way also believed in the restoration of a home land for the Jews in the form of a return to the land of Israel itself, a return that would be another critical stage in the fulfillment of prophecy upon which he believed the *parousia* depended.

The views of Lewis Way and his nineteenth century compatriots gained more momentum in the twentieth century as Christian Zionism began to gather pace and work in close association with Jewish Zionism. Evangelical Christians of this

¹ Price, Stanley, and Munro Price. *The Road to Apocalypse: The Extraordinary Journey of Lewis Way*. Memmingem: Memminger MedienCentrum, 2011.

² *Ibid.* p. 67.

sort – especially in the United States of America – have had a significant influence on Christian attitudes to Jewish people and their Faith. Many would say, though, that its effects on Western policy in the Middle East have been distinctly dubious.

Another major influence on Christian views to Judaism from a very different quarter of the Christian Faith is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church emanating its Church's Second Vatican Council in the 1960's. Its 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions', *Nostra Aetate*, and its associated documents, also draw upon Romans 9-11 reminding the Church that 'she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles'. It declares that 'God does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls he issues'; and it calls for 'mutual understanding and respect' and for fruitful 'fraternal dialogues'. In 1980 Pope John Paul II spelt out the principles on which the Council's teaching is based when he described the Jews as 'the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God'.³

Although these two theological approaches are very different, especially in their implications for international politics, they are united by two common features. First, by a re-reading of scripture that re-set their understanding of the place of Jewish people and Jewish Faith in the purposes of God and, second, by a renewed responsibility for their religious neighbour and repentance for past neglect to care for him and her and them. Re-reading of scripture, responsibility for one's religious neighbour and repentance for past failings are themes that I would like to pursue in the following three sets of reflections. I do so in the spirit of Lewis Way whom the Congress of Vienna called 'the friend of humanity'⁴ and whose deepest motivation was to be a friend of the God who reached out his hand of friendship in the person of Jesus Christ.

³ Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*. Vatican II, October 28, 1965.

⁴ Price, Stanley, and Munro Price. *The Road to Apocalypse: The Extraordinary Journey of Lewis Way*. Memmingem: Memminger MedienCentrum, 2011, p. 68.

Coventry

For the past five years I have been Bishop of Coventry living in and serving a city that calls itself a 'City of Peace and Reconciliation'. That bold claim, recently reaffirmed by the City Council in these early years of the twenty first century, originates from dark days in the mid-twentieth century when German bombs fell on Coventry, killing hundreds of its people, maiming others and destroying many of its buildings, including its beautiful medieval Cathedral. It is said that the Provost (the senior priest) of the Cathedral, using ash that was still hot from the inferno that had rained down from the skies, inscribed the words 'Father, forgive' onto the broken wall of the now ruined Cathedral. It was a powerful, prophetic gesture. It not only set the direction of the Cathedral's ministry and life to the present day and, I hope beyond, it began a remarkable renewal of the city's sense of identity and purpose. *I have come to believe that it was a manifesto for the reconciliation of conflict of any sort, religious or otherwise, and a charter for peace between peoples.*

On Christmas Day 1940, about six weeks after its destruction, the BBC broadcast its Christmas Service from the ruins of Coventry's Cathedral. Provost Howard said to the nation: 'What we need to tell the world is this: that with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it may be, to banish all thoughts of revenge [. . .] We are going to try to make a kinder, simpler – a more Christ-Child-like sort of world'⁵. He talked about how, after the madness of war was over, the British people would need to reach out to those who had been their enemies and find ways to re-establish friendship.

For Dick Howard, the Christmas story as told in scripture reveals a way of human living predicated on peace. At the deep centre of the Christmas story is a radical application of the God of Moses who sees his people's sufferings and who comes down to deliver humanity from its own inhumanity. As the Christ-child inhabits human life, including the scriptures by which he is formed, he lays out patterns of human life in which enemies become friends and estranged brothers

⁵ Wright, Kenyon. *Coventry - Cathedral of Peace: Healing the Wounds of History in International Reconciliation*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012, p. 43.

recognise that they both belong to one Father. According to Christian Faith, Jesus did not just teach moral truths or provide an example of godly living to follow, he endured the most extreme conditions of human violence and suffering in order to effect a reconciliation between God and humanity and, within humanity itself, a reconciliation that is rooted in forgiveness.

Provost's Howard's shortening of Jesus' words from the cross, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing' to the simple 'Father forgive', was a profound recognition that Christian Faith regards all people as complicit in the suffering of the world, and its trials and tribulations. He was ready, therefore, to reach out to the enemy bearing not only a responsibility for the good of the other but also a sense of responsibility for, as it were, the 'badness' of the other.

The Cathedral's instinct for a new reconciled Europe was given urgent impetus as the full horror of the devastation of German cities by Allied bombers became clear. Justice demanded that the Nazi perpetrators of war and violence, especially in light of their demonic determination to annihilate the Jewish people, should be condemned by the full force of international outrage and legal powers. At the same time, compassion commanded that hands of help and friendship be extended to the millions of ordinary Germans traumatised by strategic decisions to obliterate their homes and livelihoods and to crush their hope and will.

While the Second World War was not explicitly a religious war, it was the religious response in places such as Coventry that has the most to teach contemporary attempts to reconcile identities and pursue peace. We see in the experience of Coventry, how reconciliation motivated by faith results in seeking to heal the wounds of history by compassionate concern for the other, the building of relationships and the quest for reconciliation between peoples through confession of complicity and expressions of forgiveness. Of course, Coventry is far from being a reconciled and peaceful city. It is as capable of crime, hatred and violence as other cities. Yet, when push risks coming to shove, its story of reconciliation can make a difference to the way it does things. An impressive example took place this year in the wake of Fusilier Lee Rigby's

brutal murder in Woolwich. It was a dangerous time for Muslim communities as reprisals were threatened, and some happened. There were some nasty incidents up the road in Birmingham. But in Coventry there was a very determined effort by police, City Council and other Faith Communities to stand with the Muslim communities of Coventry and to support them. It was clear that key leaders of Coventry, including the leaders of the Muslim communities themselves, were inspired by a common narrative of peace of reconciliation which became the public discourse in Mosque, Church, Council and Media.

Pilgrimage

My third set of reflections emerges from a recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land which launched me into the writing of a book about seeing Jesus. One of Jesus' stories that was in the back of my mind during my travels, and which became one of the texts from the Gospels with which I worked as I wrote the book, was the one that we generally know as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, or the Parable of the Lost Son. Benedict, Pope Emeritus, prefers to call it 'the Story of the Two Lost Sons and the Compassionate Father'. St Luke tells us that, 'all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"' (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus, in good rabbinic style, tells them a story: three stories, in fact, all of them about lost-ness, and one of them about two sons. I will not go further into the parable now except to say that, as I re-read the story through eyes that had been opened in some new way through the pilgrimage, I realized that the Pope is right (and, I add quickly, so was the Protestant Rembrandt in his profound, painted meditation on the parable): the parable is about the sons of Israel and their compassionate Father. Jesus is saying to both groups who stood before him – the tax collectors and sinners *and* the Pharisees and scribes – you are both brothers of the same Father who *goes out* to reach you.

So much of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is about two brothers who become estranged and need to be reconciled: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Peter and Paul, Jews and Gentiles. These

abidingly relevant stories begin with the whole of humanity, focus down onto the people of Israel and then broaden out again into the whole of the human race as the wild olive tree is grafted, by God's grace, into root of the stock of Jesse.

There is another story that Jesus told, also about brothers, that helps to interpret all these other fraternal tensions. Jesus has just told a clever lawyer who had asked Jesus what he should do to 'inherit eternal life' that he should live out the *She'ma*: Love the Lord you God with the whole of your being 'and your neighbour as yourself'. 'And who is my neighbour?', the lawyer retorted, to check Jesus. 'A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho', began Jesus in an extended move that, by the end of it, would checkmate the lawyer out of the game of religious argumentation and challenge him with a new way of living (Luke 10.25-30). You know the story, the good neighbour, it turns out, is not the 'good Israelite', as would have been expected by his hearers, but rather the 'bad Samaritan'. Relations between Jews and Samaritans ('the foolish people that live in Shechem', as they were known) had been seriously strained for centuries. In Jesus' day they were at an all time low. Jews called Shechem the 'City of the Senseless', barred its people from the Temple and exempted anyone who murdered a Samaritan from the death penalty. For their part, Samaritans laid waste Jewish land, desecrated the Temple by scattering bones around it on one of the holy nights of the Passover and attacked pilgrims on the pilgrimage route from Galilee to Jerusalem. From within this interracial and interreligious tension, with its painful memories of recent atrocities, Jesus took his hearers back to a deeper history – a time when the people of Samaria had taken pity on a large group of Jewish prisoners of war and, so 2 Chronicles 28.15 tells us, 'clothed all that were naked among them [. . .] gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them; and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kindred at Jericho, the city of palm trees'.

This was not just a piece of skillful story telling. Jesus was helping his hearers to re-read their scripture and, in so doing, re-read their God. Please do not let this imply that Jesus was some sort of religious syncretist or relativiser of religious truth. We know from Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman that he was

uncompromising about central aspects of Jewish Faith and quite willing to tell others that they were wrong. Jesus was no first century anticipation of the sort of twenty first century pluralism that denies the divine prerogative to reveal. But he was the sort of person who could look clearly into the eyes of steadfast love and unbounded compassion of the God who had revealed himself truly to the people of Israel. In so doing, he was able to dig deeply into his own religious tradition and uncover the principles of respect and responsibility for other peoples, repentance for the failings of one's people and reconciliation between peoples. It is only the Samaritan whose 'heart is wrenched open' at the suffering of an Israelite. It is only when my heart is opened towards another that I will begin to see them as God sees them and find a way of reconciling our identities and seeking peace together.

Some practices

My fourth set of reflections revolve around two practices of encounter between other religious traditions. The first is drawn from my engagement as a Bishop with other Faith traditions in the city of Coventry. It all begins with hospitality. Inviting Faith Leaders into my own home, eating together and enjoying each other's company has been the basis of anything good that has followed. Food soon leads to conversation which I have found is best steered to questions of holiness: brothers and sisters who seek to follow a holy God share, in some very deep way, a longing for divine righteousness to be reflected in our personal and family lives, our communities and in our nation and in our world. Solidarity as people of Faith who, though different, are bound by common and profound concerns, leads to friendship and to a readiness to make common cause. One example among many is the *British Organisation for People of Asian-origin* (BOPA), based in the West Midlands, of which I am a Patron. It is a body that brings together people of Asian origin regardless of religion who rejoice in both their ethnic origin and their British identity. Of course, Sikh, Muslim, Hindu and Christian do not leave their religious identities behind in the organisation's work, as I discovered when someone assured me at a large event last year, 'Bishop, you will do very well in all your endeavours because we are all praying for you and so you have the power of all four gods on your side!' Very bad theology, of course,

but a nice example of people of Faith finding ways not only to laugh together but, as it were, to laugh at each other before the God who was, I suspect, not slow in seeing the joke.

More seriously, through hospitality and conversation, friendship, solidarity and common cause, deeper levels of theological engagement begin to develop. With the ground prepared in this way, they lead to the sort of 'heart to heart' engagement that is often much more fruitful than the 'head to head'-type debate about rival truth claims on which other models of dialogue are based. 'What comes from the heart enters the heart'⁶, says the eminent Muslim scholar, Aref Ali Nayed, who also introduced me to this wise Qur'anic advice:

Call [them] to the path of your Lord with wisdom and kindly exhortation, and reason them in the most courteous manner. For your Lord knows best those who have strayed from His path, and He knows who are rightly-guided. (The Holy Qur'an, 16:125).

The second practice to which I would like to refer is a form of engagement between serious adherents of religious faiths that combines heart and head. It has become known as 'Scriptural Reasoning'. It began as a way of Jews and Christians considering their scriptures together but soon started to embrace Muslims in discussions of particular texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an. Other configurations of religions with their sacred texts also take place, and to great effect. I have found it an enormous privilege to be able to read and talk about a passage from the Bible – the Good Samaritan – for example with a Jew and Muslim, and then to hear them reflect on that same passage with wisdom of their own faith. Equally, it is a profound experience to hear a Jew and a Muslim speak about one of their sacred texts and then to be given the opportunity to reflect on it from my tradition. To do so is to be drawn into a sacred space of conversation in which, as people of firm religious convictions, and keeping the integrity of our own scriptures, we are able to draw

⁶ Nayed, Aref Ali. *Growing Ecologies of Peace, Compassion and Blessing: A Muslim Response to 'A Muscat Manifesto'* Dubai: Kalam Research & Media, 2010, p. 13.

from our rich wells, as Jesus said, truths both old and new. The aim is not to seek agreement but to seek a form of understanding and empathy that, in turn, allows a respectful way of handling long-term disagreement peaceably.

These sorts of authentic engagements with other religious identities and traditions, lead to a deeper engagement with one's own religious identity and tradition. Although I cannot speak for Judaism I cannot help wondering whether the more that faithful Jews relate to people of another Faith, the more their calling to be 'a light to the nations, that [God's] salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Isaiah 49.6) will act as the interpretive key of their scripture. Similarly, I cannot speak for Islam but I am moved by the way Aref Ali Nayed, a leading exponent of Scriptural Reasoning, describes the only true Qur'anic interpretation as that which is in line with the mercy and compassion of God. I can speak in some way for Christianity, though, especially with the help of Augustine who was very clear that love is the criterion of the Bible and that any interpretation that goes against love is false. 'God is love' (1 John 4.8) and, therefore, love is 'patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things . . . [and] . . . endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13.4-7).

Conclusion: the ways of love that please God

So I end with a simple but profound insight by David Ford, Founder and Director of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, advocate of Scriptural Reasoning, and recipient of the Coventry International Prize for Peace and Reconciliation, that we should deal with people of other Faith 'in ways that please God'⁷. Such ways, I submit, will flow from God's unbounded compassion and will keep re-reading holy scripture to ensure that one's reading is true to the abundance of God's compassion. They will treat others with the respect due to those made in the image and likeness of God and be ready to take responsibility for their welfare. They will recognise mutual complicity in each other's failings, repent of them and

⁷ Ford, David F. *A Muscat Manifesto: Seeking Inter-Faith Wisdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, 2009, p. 8.

seek reconciliation. They will develop deep, empathetic understanding not only of the other religion and its myriad of cultures but also of the tensions, troubles and, even, inconsistencies within that religion. They will seek always to enter more deeply into the truth that God has revealed and to live peaceably with whatever differences remain between them until the end of time. They will be the ways of love, for that is the way that pleases God, the creator and healer and lover of the world.