

## 'SPIRITUALITY AND JUSTICE: BEING HUMAN IN A CHAOTIC WORLD.' I.

*There are five people in this room  
who still don't know what I'm saying.  
"What is she saying?" they're asking.  
"What is she doing here?"  
It is not enough to be interminable;  
one must also be precise. (1)*

This poem, by the African-American writer Alice Walker, is a favourite of mine. I feel privileged to have been invited to speak to you; I promise not to be interminable and I will try to be precise.

### **I A spiritual task for everybody**

Spirituality is a word which is understood in a multiplicity of ways, so in the interest of precision, I will give you **my** definition of it, which will form the basis of what I say. You may not agree with this definition, but hopefully you'll know what I'm talking about. It's indebted to the Latin-American theologian, Jon Sobrino.

Once, Jesus was talking to the Pharisees about spirituality, and he used the analogy of a cup, saying '*Did not God, who made the outside, also make the inside*' (Luke 11,40): Our spirituality is our profoundest motivation, those instincts, intuitions, longings and desires that move us, animate us, inspire us (lit. breathe through us)...it is the force that moves us. But it is also our ultimate concern or orientation or goal, that person, object, ideal or value that attracts us, that draws us. If you like, it's the inner life of the cup.

But our spirituality is not just interiority. It is also our choices and actions; it is where spirit is given flesh, where intention becomes action, where we practice what we preach. Our spirituality shows up just as much in how we spend our money, our time, our abilities, as in how we say our prayers. If you like, it's how we use the cup.

And our spirituality is also our relationships: with our environment, with other people, with our own most hidden and unknown selves. If you like, it's who we share the cup with.

**Everyone has a spirituality, just as everyone has a physicality.**

Some spiritualities show up dressed in strange clothes. A fervent football fan might be most profoundly motivated by loyalty to his team; his ultimate concern might be that they should win the European Cup; all his choices and actions would be directed to enabling him to follow and support the team and his relationships would all be lived in the light of, and affected, for good or bad, by his passion. But there would be many familiar features in his spirituality. Loyalty and trust and devotion would all be there, for better or for worse...celebration and sorrow would be there...belonging and identity and community would be there... the wiping-clean of the slate and the hope of a new start would be there, in the next game or the next season....

Some spiritualities the spirituality of Nazism, for example, are profoundly perverse and distorted....

Our culture pays much attention to our physicality but often less to the care and nurture of our spirituality. We want to be whole people, or, we might say, we want to live at peace with ourselves, to become our true selves, to be fully alive, to realise our potential. But the gap between our longings and aspirations and the way we actually live can be hugely painful and damaging, especially if our spirituality is unnamed, unrecognised and unloved. We are hungry with an emptiness we do not understand and do not know how to feed, so we fill ourselves with whatever is available and become more distressed when it does not satisfy, perhaps even makes us feel bad. We need the help, insight and support of others to integrate our intentions and our actions. We are neither just individuals nor collective; we are persons in community, and communities also have a spirituality. '...the Spirit's power operates always in the interactions of community rather than in the recesses of the individual soul.' (*John Taylor*) All religions teach that it is in community that we are able to become our true selves.

## II A spiritual task of discernment

*...for the question is always how  
out of all the chances and changes  
to select the features of real significance  
so as to make of the welter  
a world that will last  
and how to order the signs and symbols  
so they will continue to form new patterns  
developing into new harmonic wholes  
so to keep life alive  
in complexity  
and complicity with all of being-  
there is only poetry.* (Kenneth White) (2)

### **'Selecting the features of real significance...'**

Every day people are faced with the challenge of selecting the features of real significance and of ordering the signs and symbols. This is a spiritual task. But very often, they do not have a framework or structure of **meaning** and **belonging** and **identity** to support and nurture them in this task. Many of the ways in which people have previously understood their lives to be meaningful - in their relationship to the land, in their work, in community, clan or family, in religion or ideology - have been subjected to a breaking process, a shaking of the foundations, which has shaken people loose from them as a source of meaning, and hence of belonging, identity and wellbeing. Many of the familiar markers and signposts have disappeared or been discredited. But even when disconnected from them, the yearning for these things remains.

We suffer their loss as a bereft-ness, seek to recreate them elsewhere if we can; or suppress the grief and enter a void. Perhaps our obsession with busyness and growth and filling every physical and aural space is symptomatic of a present without depth.

In that loss, or that void, much has been thrown on to other things to fill the gap, to restore meaning and belonging and identity. The nuclear family has had a burden of expectation thrown on to it, of meeting all the needs and aspirations of its members, that has simply proved too great to carry. It is cracking under the strain. The nation state, a political construct which has had varying degrees of success, is always at risk of being understood as a destructive cultural or ethnic nationalism, and is now severely

constrained by globalisation.

The marketplace constantly exhorts us to find meaning, belonging, identity, in the gratification of our desires through the economic. Whether our hungers are really met in the array which we are invited to consume is debatable. What is sure that the cost of economic growth is huge, and is unequally borne by the poorest and most vulnerable. The damage to the earth's ecology renders everyone deeply insecure in the long term.

One effect of our market spirituality is a disordered relationship with **time**. In the 'time is money' world, time too is becoming increasingly commodified. But it takes time to see the intrinsic worth and delicacy of feathers, shells and sea-shaped stones, to differentiate and appreciate the profound beauty of the ordinary, unglamorous, unexotic people and places and experiences that we take for granted in our 'in-your-face' culture. It takes time to build real, respectful relationships.

Its commodification, along with that of sexuality, is one of the things that contributes to the loss of the erotic from life. There are so many deeply unappealing transactions between people, not just sexual ones, conducted in such perfunctory terms, that, far from increasing human fulfilment, they actually drain from it anything the least bit erotic. Though there's plenty of appetite around, much of it artificially stimulated to sell us more things we don't need and didn't know we wanted, real heartstopping desire seems somehow to be on the wane.

Desire, that truly potent alchemy of tenderness and ruthlessness, is awakened by and directed towards someone or something beyond the self, which attracts by its very being and otherness. It is incompatible with the self-referential transaction, requiring as it does the capacity to go beyond oneself, and being at its intensest a slow-burner.

Eroticism is not simply a function of sexuality, it is a way of being in the world with **hope** and is also the province of art and philosophy, of gardening and campaigning and playing sport and parenting. But the disciplines of eroticism require an understanding of the value of restraint to fully appreciate liberation. And contrary to conventional wisdom, desire, not morality or law, is the driving force of religion, whether experienced as the attraction of the ultimate Other, or, more perversely, as the fear of abandonment by that Other which can so easily turn into moralising or legalism. There is a contemplative passion that will never be understood by those who measure the erotic by sexual performance, there is an eroticism of justice.

In almost every area of life, from gender roles to the nature of work to the role of religion, this is a time of radical transition, a *kairotic* time, offering both danger and opportunity. But the focus of values is shifting now from the institutional to the relational. We now increasingly judge, evaluate, decide what something is worth to us, how much it matters, by the quality of relationship it allows and invokes. In a free-market, capitalist philosophy, the criteria for evaluation are extrinsic, they are set by the market. Value is added. The shift to having these be the criteria for relationship is well underway. Our society is inclined to measure the worth of people by how useful, productive, beautiful, successful they are, and to undervalue those who are not these things. Today, many people who have rejected religion because they see it as intellectually unacceptable, or as an aspect of bourgeois morality, or as dangerously

exclusive seek a spirituality which affirms diversity, and the intrinsic worth of all its members, regardless of their utility, rarity or success.

'...for the question is always how?'

In a spirituality which is both motivated by and has compassion as an end, spiritual nurture, of ourselves and of others, involves, I think,

- Where there is hunger for meaning  
**asking questions;** it is in the struggle to name and articulate our truth that we learn to know ourselves. (Jesus asked questions as much as he gave answers)
- Where there is hunger for intimacy  
**creating safe space** - accepting, non-judgemental, encouraging, disciplined -in which to know and be known. Genuine intimacy is a precious gift. It is rare enough in our depersonalised society that we should not take it for granted. Intimacy is formed in a context with defined boundaries, within which it is safe to be vulnerable, open, to let the masks slip. It is a natural part of close relationship with a group of people over a period of time, in which respect, listening, and confidentiality, all contribute to the building up of trust.
- Where there is hunger for belonging  
**encouraging the art of sharing** through a revaluing of the communal joys and a rebuilding of confidence in relationship

The word 'share' comes from the old English *scearu*, which literally means to shear or cut off. My dictionary gives three meanings for the word 'share'. First, 'to distribute or apportion', with its strong suggestion of power, of who has the right to determine who shall get a share, and of what size. In my dictionary, this meaning is illustrated by the phrase, 'to share out food and clothing to the poor'. The second meaning for 'sharing' is 'the dividing or cutting off part of what one has, and giving it to another or others'. It is to give away some, and to have less oneself. It is a diminishment. The third, and last, meaning my dictionary gives is 'to enjoy in common with others, to participate'. The first two meanings focus on the thing being shared, the third on the people it is being shared with. Between these two lines in a dictionary lies all the difference in the world.

To speak of sharing in some circles is to be branded as naive, idealistic, out of date; a distribution strategy for the trickle-down theory, and the only question is how best to share out the crumbs from the rich man's table. More broadly, there is a fear, even among well-intentioned people, that sharing means less for us, and this at a time when not just poor people, but also the middle-classes are feeling increasingly insecure. This fear certainly drives much of the hysteria about asylum seekers. And that insecurity-about jobs, about education, about health (the kind of insecurity that much of the world always has to live with) feeds on the fact of increasing isolation and separation from the rest of the body politic.

Baldly put, fewer and fewer people have the experience of sharing as enjoyment in common with others. We have less experience of having to rely on others, of having a pleasure enhanced by doing it with others, of seeing ourselves as a part of others, dependent upon them, and them on us, and all our politics and all our economics are exacerbating this trend. Such is the competitive nature of the market now that it gets harder and harder to engage in a demanding common task in which co-operation is both a necessity and a joy. Skills, knowledge, information are increasingly commodities to be competitively traded and jealously guarded.

In six years of living in Iona Abbey, welcoming visitors from all over the world, I was at first struck, and then shamed by the profound and bitter isolation in which so many people exist. I remember on numerous occasions, people saying to me at the end of a week, "This has been the best week of my life". For those of us who lived there in community, it had probably been a run-of-the mill kind of week, full of the tensions, arguments, frustrations and joys of just living with others. But for people who never get close enough to others to experience real sharing, whether they live alone or with others, even the tensions were perceived as a blessing.

Because we have lost confidence in our capacity to make and sustain relationships, it's easier not to risk the attempt-and there are many substitutes now available to protect us behind our boundaries, to ensure that we need have less and less actual connection with actual people. And so we have fewer and fewer opportunities to experience common enjoyment. Even the efforts to ease loneliness can end up as two people being lonely together. In such a context, sharing is perceived not as a pleasure but as a burden. Sharing as an art, as creativity, adventure, discovery, joy, in which the sacrifice, discipline and pain that all art involves is more than compensated for by the sheer delight of creation, is very hard when you've lost confidence in your capacity to create. Breaking one's isolation open, that it may be shared and enjoyed, is a risky thing to do with so little trust in the possibility of common joy-and perhaps I mean common not just in the sense of being with others, but in the sense of joy in the small, the ordinary, the everyday.

There is something profound in this most basic tenet of community, that we are part of one another, bound up together. This is a struggle of spiritualities between a spirituality of the market, of extrinsic worth and value addition, and a spirituality of intrinsic worth, of value for people. It is a crucial struggle in a world in which we are still being told 'There Is No Alternative'. There are so few icons of sharing around at the moment. Everywhere there are people struggling to break free of the game of winners and losers, who want to rediscover the art of sharing, but don't quite know how. To create models of communal joys, of new confidence in relationship, is, I think, to serve not just our own communities but our whole society.

### **Spiritual practice**

For me, and I am sure for many people, home is not only the place which roots and grounds my spirituality, it is also where I can safely be myself, where I can try on new ideas, gestate them as I do the laundry and potter with my window-boxes. It is where I know that in times of confusion or intricate problems, cleaning out cupboards may shed a little light on the way I see things. George MacLeod, the Founder of the Iona Community, used from time to time to go into the Abbey and start moving around the furniture in the North Transept. When that happened, the Abbey staff would brace themselves because they knew that George was about to come up with a new scheme. My ideas don't have the stature of his, but I can identify with the furniture moving. And home is also the place where I can be angry in the evening, weep in the night and have my apology accepted in the morning.

But as an urban person, I also have a spirituality of the streets. I live in the middle of Glasgow and I don't have a car, so I walk and travel by public transport a lot. There are

times when this is a considerable nuisance. But I have come to see it as a great blessing, because it has kept me close to the life of the world. At times, I have walked the streets feeling like an outsider;

*Isolation in the midst of crowds.*

*Alienation sharpened by all the unquestioning belonging.*

*Strange languages and even stranger silences leading to misunderstanding.*

*Regrets for many kinds of loss...(3)*

and on occasion I have been like Lot's wife, looking back and getting stuck for a while. But just keeping on walking also keeps moving me on.

Almost without realising it, I begin to notice the faces of the people loitering or hurrying around me, and some of them begin to be familiar, and we begin to exchange smiles and greetings about the weather. Over time, I learn their stories and gradually I become drawn into the web of activity and relationship that makes up a neighbourhood. As I keep walking, I see the elders and the rowans move through the cycle of bud and flower and fruit and falling leaves and come to appreciate the extent to which the life cycle is evident even in the greyest city streets. I have been shaken into joy by the sound of a saxophone played by a street musician, and have accosted complete strangers to get them to wonder with me at the late afternoon sun turning the windows of a high-rise into sheets of gold. Through the life of the streets, I rediscover belonging every day.

There are, of course, and always will be, arid patches, desert times in my life; Times of sheer helplessness and grief at the tragedy in the world and things I cannot change. Times of lostness and confusion, when I feel particularly vulnerable or exposed or self-loathing, times when the temptation to live out of my fears rather than my freedom is particularly acute (and not always resisted).

*And in the dark, fear.*

*And in the fear, darkness,  
fearfully anticipating enemies  
and finding you are actually  
facing yourself. (4)*

But I am learning, somewhat painfully, to embrace these times because in them I am forced to confront my own emptiness, see my false gods fall, feel the rock beneath the shifting sands. Sometimes you can't even feel it, you just have to trust it's there; and in this I have been greatly helped by the testimony of witnesses, nomads who happen along with a message that says, 'trust the desert'. Or who don't say anything at all, but just show up and share the emptiness. Curiously, these are hardly ever the people I expect, nor even the ones I might have chosen. But I like to think of them as angels.

Home, family, friends, city streets, the changing seasons and the life cycles of a community, poetry and song and a passion for justice, solitude and the strange angels of the barren times - these are the things that move and attract me, that nourish me and challenge me. They inspire me, breathe through me; they are my spirituality. They are extremely ordinary and not very religious at all. They are, I think, about being real, about being human. But that is what the gospel is about for me. It is not about being religious or even being Christian. It is the good news about being human. *The glory of God is a human being fully alive (St Irenaeus)* Christian faith gives me a language to

name that experience of being human and to express my appreciation for it; it gives me a sacramental life in which the memory of suffering may be restored to hope; it gives me a community which is always being broken open to be shared; it gives me a story to live by. But it is the being human that is the point, not the religion.

### Spiritual re - evaluation

Christian spirituality has a great richness of wisdom and resource to draw on for people who experience themselves as living in the cracks or in the desert - for discovering what really matters, is most valuable; for reconstructing and reordering a hope-filled life.

- In the face of a dominant economic system which sets value by market forces and whose spirituality is one of value addition, of extrinsic worth, Christian spirituality can affirm and practice **intrinsic worth**, in which all living things, including the earth itself, have innate value separate from and beyond their utility; in which the commodification of all of life is resisted and reversed and in which justice is done.
- In the face of seemingly hostile global forces, of the sense of powerlessness to effect positive change, and of the collapse of traditional support structures, Christian spirituality can affirm and practice **re-personalised human exchange**, an inclusive respect for the 'other' (neighbour **and** stranger) and a love of kindness in which the potential of all people, not just 'our people' can be nurtured.
- In the face of human *hubris* which conceives itself as creator rather than created and which has come to threaten life on earth, Christian spirituality, sensitive to our interdependence, can affirm and practice a more **self-disciplined ethos of reverence and respect** for cultural, spiritual and bio-diversity alike, in which criteria for the good life are invested less in possession and appearance and more in appreciation, substance and a sense of awe at the mystery at the heart of life.

In all of these, Christian spirituality can learn from and find common ground with other faiths and with artists, ecologists, community activists, people who share a spirituality of compassion and solidarity. The word *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible, which is most often translated as *mercy*, is, in fact, a word so rich in meaning that we cannot adequately contain it in English. It has been expressed in various translations as loving kindness, steadfast, or constant or tender love. Other synonyms in the scriptures include grace, forgiveness, motherliness. Perhaps compassion is the best modern translation.

Compassion is more than pity. It is the empathetic appreciation of the other as person, the ability, in so far as anyone can enter the experience of another, to listen attentively to them, to look at things from their point of view, to honour their subjectivity, their own experience of themselves. At its extremity, it is to see the enemy as human. And it is not merely to feel, to be sentimental, but to respect, to reflect and to choose.

Compassion is not detached and impersonal. It is not, I think, possible to be compassionate without also being passionate. It is not by chance that Christ's suffering and death are referred to as the Passion. To be passionate is to suffer, in its archaic sense of allowing, experiencing - whether of love or sorrow, anger pain, or joy...or of allowing little children to approach.

And if compassion is the activity of *hesed* in our personal relationships, then it seems to me that solidarity is its corporate or political dimension. Biblically, it is the mark of the redeemed community as well as the changed individual. The solidarity of Jesus raised people to their feet and stood beside them in their shame, stigma and oppression. Jesus repeatedly identified himself with the socially excluded, invisible and outcast; made himself vulnerable like them, powerless like them, made them visible, and therefore threatening to the powerful, to the extent of sharing their fate. In making the injustices done to them visible, he himself became visible. In compassion and solidarity, he went where he had no need to go. In the course of his three-year ministry, he moved

- from private faith to public witness
- from personal comfort to shared vulnerability
- from self-sufficiency to interdependence

I see this kind of solidarity being expressed all around; in campaigns and culture, in the action and prayer of people who work for justice and its fruits of peace in a hundred ways. I see it when people are moved by personal compassion to stand together in solidarity against everything that dehumanises and de-personalizes.

The Japanese-American theologian Kosuke Koyama has written: *What is love if it remains invisible and intangible? Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. The devastating poverty in which millions of children live is visible. Racism is visible. Machine guns are visible. Slums are visible. The gap between rich and poor is glaringly visible. Our response to these realities must be visible.*

One of the dangers I see in much contemporary spirituality is that it is extremely individualised. Perhaps it is that we can value individual compassion, but feel uncomfortable or irritated when solidarity shows up as its corporate or political dimension, asking awkward questions about the violence done to people, to the earth. Real compassion refuses privatisation, requires the same principles to be practised in the public arena as in the personal. Jesus' teaching is never only personal. It also calls for the transformation of structures and institutions.

I read once that natural pearl is formed in shellfish as a reaction to an irritant, like a piece of grit. When I look at my life, it seems full of grit; of failures, and ambiguity and partial achievements and excruciating moments and uncomfortable complicity with systems I hate, and sorrow for all the things I can't change, and a God I only catch occasional glimpses of when I'm not looking, or looking for something else. But I don't experience it that way. It just feels like life, and it's also full of things that, if I'm honest, **feel** like pearls, things and people that just showed up. I didn't have to dive for them, and I didn't have to sell everything I possess to get them. They are sheer grace. But if there is anything that I would describe as the goal of my spirituality, it is the increasing capacity for passion and compassion, mostly found in small things.

*the loveliness is everywhere  
even  
in the ugliest  
and most hostile environment  
the loveliness is everywhere  
at the turning of a corner*

*in the eyes  
and on the lips  
of a stranger  
in the emptiest areas  
where is no place for hope  
and only death  
invites the heart  
the loveliness is there  
it emerges  
incomprehensible  
inexplicable  
it rises in its own reality  
and what we must learn is  
how to receive it  
into ours  
(Kenneth White) (6)*

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- (1) *Alice Walker, in 'Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful', c.1984 Alice Walker, pub. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1984*
- (2) *Kenneth White, from 'A Walk Along the Shore', in 'The Bird Path', pub. Penguin 1989*
- (3) *Kathy Galloway, in 'Talking to the Bones', pub. SPCK 1996*
- (4) *Galloway, ibid*
- (5) *Kosuke Koyama, from an address given at WCC General Assembly, Harare, 1998*
- (6) *White, ibid*

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