



Trust and Risk: Christian Virtues in Politics?

by Duncan Forrester

I am very aware that the invitation to deliver the Catherwood Lecture is both an honour and a responsibility. It is an honour that I greatly appreciate because it is named after one of the most committed and insightful Christians in British public life today, for whose work and witness I have the greatest respect. And it is a responsibility that in many ways I find daunting as some one who is at some distance from the tears and the joys, the sorrows and the hopes of Northern Ireland, and yet who comes here to speak about Christian and theological responsibilities. Out of the crucible of Northern Ireland, out of sufferings and disappointment, out of anger and extraordinary generosity and faithfulness there have come saints, prophets and heroes of faith from whom I have learned a great deal and whose courage and insight put the rest of us to shame.

Living and relevant theology comes very often out of times of challenge, suffering and hope against hope. It does not emerge from the security and peace of the study, but from the places where people are hurting and faith is being challenged by violence, bitterness and fear. But for all that, I hope that as a concerned outsider and a Christian academic I may be able to say one or two helpful or illuminating things. At least I will try!

I want in this lecture to begin to respond to Alwyn Thomson's call in a recent issue of *Third Way* for a theology which treats of forgiveness and helps us to deal with our past in Christian ways, which enables us to face the inevitable conflicts of interest in a generous fashion so that real differences may not only be accommodated but enabled to play a constructive role, a theology which makes us hopefully open to the future. Only churches which embody these things in their own life, Thomson concludes, "can function as a witness and a reproach to a society that is struggling to come to terms with its past, present and future."¹ My lecture begins to explore some ways in which Christians and Christian churches which are serious about the gospel may be such agents of witness and of reproach.

Discerning the Signs of the Times²

Few of us, certainly among theologians and church leaders, are good at discerning the signs of the times. We are much better at pastoring our flocks, at healing their wounds, and containing or even redirecting their anger and confusion. We are often more concerned with maintaining purity of doctrine, or faithfulness to our particular Christian tradition, than we are concerned with asking what God is doing in this corner of his world, today, and what he is calling his people to do. "Churches," wrote Geraldine Smyth, "have not been to the fore in fostering attentiveness to the signs of the times, nor sufficiently self-critical vis-à-vis the sectarianism which pervades social and church life."³ That is at least as true in Britain as it is in Northern Ireland.

THE WEAKNESS OF THREE influential forms of social theology has, I believe, been demonstrated by the Northern Ireland situation. Reinhold Niebuhr's stress that the most we can hope for is a series of temporary and relative balances between opposing interest groups, out of which short term approximations to justice and peace may be established, offers little promise of healing deep-seated conflicts. His Christian Realism is concerned with politics as the art of the possible; what we need today is a political theology which is the art of the impossible.⁴ Liberation theology's emphasis on taking sides with the weak and the poor has much to teach us, but it does not seem able to cope with the complexity of the Northern Ireland situation, where it is so difficult to say who are the oppressors and who oppressed. Nor is natural law thinking, so illuminating in many ways in relatively harmonious plural societies, adequate to the healing of the wounds of a situation such as ours. What we need in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, is nothing less than the gospel, and faithful people and churches that are with seriousness and commitment seeking to discern the signs of the times, what God is doing, and calling us to do, in this age and in our society and culture.

But discerning the signs of the times is not easy, and never has been easy. Jesus, as is well known, rebuked the religious people of his time because they found it easy to predict the weather, but couldn't or wouldn't discern the signs of the times. The story is a familiar one. The Scribes and Pharisees, the religious and political leaders of the people, ask Jesus for a sign that will authenticate or repudiate his mission, which will explain clearly to them what is happening. They are perhaps a little cynical. Without doubt they want, as most of us do most of the time, certainty before they act. They want to minimise or abolish risk. They are unwilling to trust Jesus unless he can demonstrate totally convincingly who he is. They want simple and direct guidance.

They have in fact come to test Jesus, to catch him out, to expose him. Why should they want to do this? The answer, I think, is fairly obvious: he was asking them and everyone in Israel to take risks, to do the unprecedented, to take a gamble. He was asking them to trust God to lead them into the unknown, and to trust people like Jesus and his disciples whom they regarded as unreliable, as upstarts, as possibly seditious. They were seen as threatening to the established order of things in religion, and the rather comfortable modus vivendi the leaders of Jewry had developed with the Roman occupying power, and with their own fellow religionists.

The Scribes and Pharisees seem to feel that they can, by asking for an authenticating sign from heaven, dispose of the Jesus who is turning everything upside down. For Jesus

and his disciples are suspected of sedition, threatening law and order, and disturbing the established order of things in religion, society, and politics. So the Scribes and Pharisees cynically demand this sign; nothing less than miraculous divine confirmation will satisfy them. In asking for a sign they are in fact demanding certainty and refusing to take risks, to trust in God, or to walk by faith. That is why Jesus calls them hypocrites. They are playing at religion rather than embarking on the risky voyage of faith. They have allowed individual and group interests and sinfulness to make them blind and deaf to the signs of the times. They have swallowed their community's view that it already possesses the truth, that there are no fresh challenges, insights or opportunities today, and so they feel no need to bring every thought and act and aspiration into captivity to Christ.

Jesus accuses the Scribes and Pharisees of being hypocrites, playing a part, not being fully honest. But there is another implication of the label 'hypocrite'. An actor operates on a stage, is totally engrossed with what goes on there, and blocks off all that goes on in the real world outside the theatre. Is Jesus reminding us that the God of Israel, and all true religion, is concerned, not mainly or exclusively with what goes on in the stage of the church, or the denomination, or even religion, but with what is happening in God's world, and to all the people for whom Christ was to die? What happens in the street is at least as important as what happens in the sanctuary. For Christ died, as we learn from the Letter to the Hebrews, outside the city, for the sake of the city and its life.

In response to the Scribes and Pharisees who ask for an authenticating sign from heaven, Jesus declares that for all their biblical learning, and for all their ability to forecast the weather from looking at the skies, they, the religious leaders, cannot read and understand the 'signs of the times', that is, the indications of what God is doing and going to do in the world. Perhaps over-familiarity with the Scriptures, together with their own interest in the preservation of the status quo have blinded them to the signs of what God is doing in the world, of the judgements and opportunities which God is offering to them today, in their specific situation. They no longer look to the world to discern God acting there.

They, like us, ought to learn from the Scriptures how to discern God acting here and now. But the Scribes and Pharisees were reluctant to see the Scriptures and worship as the points at which we are able to discern most clearly what God is doing outside, in our world today, and what God is calling us to do here and now. The Scriptures, which should be a kind of lens to help us see into the depths of what is happening in our world have become like a crystal ornament worn around the neck.

WE SHOULD, JESUS SUGGESTS, look to the world to discern in the light of the Scriptures what God is doing now, and what he is calling us to do. The signs of the times that we may find there are both in the indicative mood – what God is doing in our day and our context – and in the imperative mood – what we should do in response to God’s gracious acting in our time, our community and our context.

The Greek term for ‘times’, *kairos*, means a turning point, a crisis, a moment of judgement, of opportunity, and of danger. It is not a comfortable or relaxing season. It is deeply disturbing. It requires courage as well as discernment to grasp the opportunity of the particular *kairos* in which we find ourselves, but we can be like the Scribes and Pharisees, with a wooden and mechanical biblical faith, which acts like blinkers to restrict the view rather than a lens to help us see more clearly. We are urged by Jesus to look to the world and what is happening there in order to discern the action of God and to learn how God calls us to respond. Scripture, worship, and prayer can and should be aids to discernment. And with these aids, in a *kairos* of danger and opportunity, like the present moment in Northern Ireland, we are called to trust God, and take risks, which may anticipate the future.

Discerning the signs of the times involves more than recourse to scriptural narratives or to distinctively theological perspectives. Faithful discernment depends on close and objective analysis of the forces at work in current events, and enlightened, wise, sensitive and tentative projections of the future, so that our behaviour may manifest practical wisdom in its response to events. The capacity for discernment rests also on imagination, insight, experience and judgement - qualities which are, one hopes, nurtured in the Christian church and through its worship.

So here there is an assumption that people of faith should have some capacity to discern the signs of the times, and should strive to develop and sharpen this capacity. This is to be done humbly and penitently, because there is nothing more dangerous than a clever people who believe they have ‘cracked God’s code’, and self-righteously see judgement for others and the vindication of their own cause writ large throughout the historical process. Penitence, not pride, is the condition for discernment.

The signs of the times discussed in the gospels are manifestations of a new order latent in the disorder of the day, ready to emerge from the womb of the past. The Scribes and Pharisees demanded a sign authenticating Jesus and the message of God’s Reign which he preached. They wanted all doubt removed. They sought certainty before they decided how to respond. They were not willing to take a risk. They wanted a sign so that they could be sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Jesus movement was the manifestation of God’s Rule before they responded to Jesus, before they did anything, before they put

anything on the line, before they committed themselves. They wanted proof, certainty, before they decided how to respond to this strange, compelling teacher. But faith and life are not like that. We have to act before we are sure, and in the acting our understanding is clarified.

Jesus refers to the story of Jonah as a sign. Jonah was one of God’s people who witnessed to the new order despite himself. He tried to avoid the call of God; he ran away. And finally he reluctantly and dyspeptically denounced the Ninevites, the outsiders, and their ways, and settled down under a bush to witness their deserved destruction which would be, he thought, a clear sign of the vitality of the divine justice. But to his chagrin, the Ninevites attended to the proclamation of God’s Reign. They repented, and Nineveh was spared: a sign of the mercy and the love of God, that actually infuriated the pious Jonah. He was rather like the Scribes and Pharisees who had asked for a sign: stewards of a true message, but treating it in a mechanical way as if it were a possession, refusing to recognize that the call to repentance is addressed to them in their self-righteousness first of all, that judgement begins with the household of faith.

The Ninevites repented and so embraced God’s Reign, having discerned God’s activity in penitence and hope. To the Jews the Ninevites were outsiders, pagans, unbelievers. Jews found it hard to believe that God really cared for the Ninevites as much as for the Jews. That’s actually a difficult insight for any of us to swallow. But remember that it was the Ninevites, not Jonah, who repented and turned to God. Is it perhaps that penitence is the condition for true discernment? Is it that only when we admit our own implication in suspicion, misunderstanding, prejudice, hostility and violence that we become able to discern the signs of the times? Is penitence and humility the path to insight, and arrogance and self-righteousness the way to lies?

Hypocrisy, self-centredness, individual or collective, it seems, impede discernment. Pride stops us from recognising in events the judgement and the opportunity that God offers ever anew. Humility is the key to discernment. Only in the penitent joy of encountering the God of history do we find that discernment is a gift of grace.

The other side of the sign of Jonah is the disconcerting analogy between the strange story of Jonah in the belly of the whale and the no less strange and far more disturbing story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Here we find the great central sign of the Reign of God, given afresh to every generation and reflected again and again in human history, to be discerned whenever life emerges from death, hope from despair, joy from sadness, reconciliation from conflict. Here is the new order growing secretly in the midst of the chaos and violence of the world, a reality which is only to be discerned by faith, not by formula.

STRANGELY AND OMINOUSLY, the gospel narratives stress that the Scribes and Pharisees, for all their inherited scriptural wisdom and knowledge of God's people's experience of God's activity in history, were unable to read the great central sign of the times. The signs require a different sort of discernment from their tired legalistic exegesis.

But sometimes discernment happens. So how then do we discern the signs of the times? Discernment is certainly not a mechanical process, the application of simple clues or principles or guidelines from Scripture or from elsewhere. Intellectuals and theologians and ecclesiastics probably have special difficulties in discernment, because they have so often lost simplicity of vision and fallen into the grip of systems or ideologies or theologies which conceal at least as much as they reveal, so that they are not open to the radically new. To discern we need to recover true simplicity.

Discernment means putting the events and choices and responses of today within the frame of eternity - God's time - taking the long view, with attitudes and understanding shaped by faith and imbued with hope. But it also means relating to the present moment, with all its dangers, opportunities and challenges. Discernment is therefore binocular, looking both to eternity and to the present moment or *kairos* - a moment of judgement, danger and opportunity which calls on us to take risks which anticipate God's future, in all its radical newness, and to put our trust in God. The everlasting gospel provides a matrix on which we plot our faithfulness to the living God.

Reconciliation

Ephesians 2.11-22 conveniently summarises that matrix. This text affirms that at the heart of the gospel stands the overcoming, in the incarnation and passion of Jesus, of hostility and division between God and human beings, and among human beings. Here the primordial antagonism between Jew and Gentile stands for all human divisions, especially such as are exacerbated or expressed in religious terms, whether or not those divisions, suspicions and hostilities are primarily religious rather than social, cultural, economic or ethnic. On the cross something took place that we should recognise, delight in and manifest - the veil of the temple, symbolising all hostile divisions, was rent in two, the dividing wall of hostility has been destroyed for ever. God has thus reconciled Gentile and Jew in one new humanity, so making peace.

Accordingly there is good news of peace and reconciliation to proclaim: a gospel rather than a law, a declaration that something decisive for good has happened, rather than a simple call to action or an ethical demand. There is an imperative, to be sure, but it is rooted in the indicative, it flows naturally and unselfconsciously out of the recognition of what God has done for us in Christ.

A Christian understanding of reconciliation rests on something that has happened, something that has been achieved, accomplished. The situation has been changed; something objective has happened, and everything is different. This reconciliation is more than a change of mind or a call for an alteration of behaviour, although it is of course good if behaviour and thought respond to the realities of the new situation. Furthermore, this reconciliation does not belong in a separate 'religious' world, nor is it something that simply affects the individual: "God was in Christ reconciling the world (i.e. the cosmos) to himself," we read, and it is only in this broad cosmic redemption that "he has reconciled us to himself through Christ."⁵

This passage, of course, goes on to speak of "the ministry of reconciliation" and "the message of reconciliation" which have been entrusted to us. The objective historical change, in other words, calls for a response. We cannot be detached and impassive in face of it. We have to do something about it. We have to minister, share, express, enact the reconciliation in which we participate. Reconciliation has been achieved; it is already there, even if not recognised; we are called to point to, to declare, what has been done, and adapt ourselves to this gracious reality. And I also want to affirm that the gospel belongs in the public sphere, where it engages with the powers, with issues of communities and nations as well as the individual heart, and the matters that are commonly labelled 'religion'. Remember that in Matthew 25 it is the nations that are called to account.

We may not, of course, dispose of imperatives and calls to action; but we need to place them in their proper light, as responses to a gracious context, the recognition of the deeper realities of life, ways of allying ourselves with God's just and loving purposes, rather than embarking on desperate attempts to transform a hostile reality into love and fellowship. This gracious context generates trust, generosity, pertinacity and hope, and provides an alternative to the narrow 'realism' which is circumscribed by the hostilities and suspicions of the moment. Christians respond to the God of justice and love who has in Christ reconciled the cosmos to himself and has already overcome the hostilities and suspicions of today.

I agree with Barth (and with John Knox!) that the church is responsible for what happens within politics because this is so closely related to the gospel of the Reign of God. The gospel provides insights into the context, the significance and purpose of political activity, and it offers a language - particularly the discourse of reconciliation, forgiveness and justice - without which politics becomes distorted and malign. But it does not present only a fixed deposit of timeless truth; it takes different forms in different contexts.

THOSE WHO CAN DISCERN the signs of the times and embrace what I have called the gospel matrix none the less must adopt different theologies at different times, in response to different challenges, and new opportunities – ultimately as concrete responses to the call of the living God. People may move from a theology of containment to a theology of confidence building, from a theology of liberation to a theology of nation building, from a theology of confrontation to a theology of reconciliation.

A significant instance of this kind of move came from South Africa fifteen years ago. The authors of the Kairos Document of 1986 attacked what they called ‘church theology’, accusing it of advocating glib, hasty and simplistic appeals for reconciliation, as an ever present possibility. Often, the authors argued, the underlying causes of conflict and misunderstanding must be faced and resolved before reconciliation becomes a possibility. Easy calls for immediate reconciliation are like crying “‘Peace! Peace!’ Where there is no peace.” There are conflicts that lie too deep, that are too seared into the collective memory, that are still embodied in structures of injustice to be the subject of instant reconciliation. As the kairos theologians put it:

There are conflicts that can only be described as the struggle between justice and injustice, good and evil, God and the devil. To speak of reconciling these two is not only a mistaken application of the Christian idea of reconciliation, it is a total betrayal of all that Christian faith has ever meant. Nowhere in the Bible or in Christian tradition has it ever been suggested that we ought to try to reconcile good and evil, God and the devil. We are supposed to do away with evil, injustice, oppression and sin – not come to terms with it. We are supposed to oppose, confront and reject the devil and not try to sup with the devil.

In our situation in South Africa today it would be totally unChristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed.⁶

At that moment, the Kairos theologians were right in calling for “a biblical theology of confrontation, unmasking the forces of evil, rather than a theology of reconciliation with sin and the devil,”⁷ provided they hoped and prayed that the time would come for reconciliation, and provided that through the methods of confrontation and political action they used, they always kept open the possibility of reconciliation in the future. They were right also in their assertion that most deep conflicts have their roots in situations of injustice and oppression which must be put right if deep rather than superficial reconciliation is to be possible. They also recognised that penitence is needed if forgiveness and reconciliation are to be realised.

It is very hard for collectivities to repent, and there are few

instances of this happening. But without repentance the way forward is closed. Premature or wrongly timed efforts at reconciliation are worse than useless, as James Cone emphasises.⁸ Terence McCaughey has put it well:

Those who labour under the acutest sense of grievance, or who have simply suffered most, will recognise premature calls to reconciliation as a kind of impertinence – a dogged or a callous reluctance to take seriously either the guilt of the perpetrators or the suffering of the victims.⁹

Real, deep-seated historic conflicts have to be worked through and faced honestly. Evils and obstacles must be named, unmasked, and repented of. All this takes time, time for healing, time for repentance. Only after these have been worked through does reconciliation become a present possibility. And this process requires the taking of risks for the sake of reconciliation, and the cultivation of trust among those who were previously antagonists.

In South Africa they have been going through a healing process in the new kairos after their apartheid past, with all its atrocities and wounds and bitterness. They are using “a different kind of justice,”¹⁰ which is restorative and healing, rooted both in Christian faith and in African tradition, and which sees justice as “indispensable in the initial formation of political associations” with forgiveness as “an essential servant of justice.”¹¹ They have been engaged in what Desmond Tutu calls “the difficult but ultimately rewarding path of destroying enemies by turning them into friends.”¹² The issues of guilt and of retribution are not avoided or disguised, but they are put within a broader frame and a fuller understanding of justice and its end. The truth must be faced and moral responsibility accepted; the attitudes of the victims towards the perpetrators must be taken into account, for reconciliation is the ultimate aim. Perpetrators as well as victims need rehabilitation and healing. Justice and reconciliation rest on truth-telling, which is in itself often healing.

Villa-Vicencio explains the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

Our task is to explain and to understand, making every effort to enter the mind of even the worst perpetrators - without allowing those who violate the norms of decency to escape the censure of society. Guilt rests not only with those who pull the trigger, but also with those who wink as it happens. It does, however, rest decidedly more with those who kill. The one who plots and designs death may well be more guilty than the person who pulls the trigger. The person, too terrified or even too indifferent to restrain the killer, is at the same time surely less guilty than the killer who may simply have followed orders. An appeal to superior orders or to due obedience is insufficient ground for claiming immunity - and the concern of the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission focuses clearly on those who gave the command to kill and those who did the killing - not on fearful bystanders or 'passive collaborators'.

IT WOULD AT THE SAME time be a betrayal of history to suggest that they alone supported the evils of apartheid and its crimes. To fail to identify the extent of the evasion of moral responsibility for the failures of the past, is to undermine the possibility of there emerging a moral fabric capable of sustaining a society within which the atrocities of the past shall never again occur.¹³

The Commission held hearings throughout the country under slogans such as 'Revealing is Healing', 'Truth the Road to Reconciliation', and 'The Truth Hurts, But Silence Kills'.¹⁴ People were invited to tell their stories and listen to the stories of others, for the healing of memories, for the redress of offences, for the overcoming of animosities and the lies that hostility engenders, and above all, quite consciously for reconciliation.

An old woman tells of the disappearance of her fifteen year old son years before. She had heard he had been tortured and killed. She wanted to know what had happened, who had killed her son, and where. The only redress she asked for was to know that they were sorry.¹⁵ Then she could forgive and turn to the future.

Top generals of the old Special Branch and the Army approached the Commission to enquire whether, if they accepted responsibility for a list of atrocities, killings and illegalities, there was a possibility of amnesty: a tricky question, because cheap forgiveness is no forgiveness at all, and outrages the memory of the victims. But the Commission is entrusted with the power to grant amnesty where clear penitence is expressed in a willingness to make restitution, even if largely symbolic, and where amnesty serves for the just healing of the nation. But Archbishop Tutu is right to point out that general amnesty is amnesia rather than the healing of memories.¹⁶

The former President, F.W.de Klerk, declares before the Commission: "The National Party is prepared to admit its many mistakes of the past and is genuinely repentant...and we have gone on our knees before God Almighty to pray for his forgiveness."¹⁷ When President Nelson Mandela visited a hearing of the Commission in Johannesburg the subject on which evidence was being given was atrocities committed by the African National Congress against suspected dissidents. The offences of the victors too need to be taken to the bar of justice, brought into the open, if healing and reconciliation are to be possible.

Where did this understanding of the need for a resolution that is healing, relational, restorative come from? Informed commentators are quite clear: it is derived directly from the depths of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and finds significant affinities and resonances within

African traditional culture and society. It seems therefore that theological insights have in this transition at least been important factors in enabling a relatively undisturbed move from a situation of civil war to one of reconstruction, reconciliation and community building.

In South Africa there was an increasingly strong conviction that timing was of the essence. Back in 1986 the Kairos theologians warned against the dangers of seeking an easy and premature reconciliation which was formal and ideal rather than real. In South Africa many observers now speak of moving from confrontation through transition to transformation – a new kairos, a long drawn out process, which needs to be handled with great wisdom and discernment because it is dealing with deep-seated conflicts of interest and understanding.

In some respects the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland may be similar to the conflicts about apartheid and its aftermath in South Africa. But the long history and the bitter memories of the past in Ireland run even deeper, and go back hundreds of years. The war in Kosovo reminded us that sufferings, defeats and violations that are centuries old can be living political realities, determining behaviour and responses to situations. Similarly, there are memories in Ireland that call out for healing, and which must be healed before a settlement, reconciliation and fuller healing become possible. Timing is of the essence. There must be a kairos, an opportune moment, before trust and confidence and a new and broader, or perhaps more ambiguous, sense of identity can be built.

At the present time is there such a kairos in Northern Ireland? We need time, for healing, for the "reconciliation of memories,"¹⁸ and for the steady gathering of support around a vision of the peaceable future of Northern Ireland. Such a vision may be articulated, commended and defended by politicians, academics, church and community leaders of integrity and imagination. Political and religious leaders, of course, cannot be simply visionaries; they need to be able to lead their people forward and retain the confidence of their constituencies of support. They must move, and move towards reconciliation, but they cannot go too fast if trust is to grow.

Both South Africa and Northern Ireland show in striking form the continuing importance not simply of religious rhetoric, but of central religious insights in non-violent conflict resolution, as there is a move away from violence to other, less harmful ways of dealing with deep-seated conflicts.

Politics as a Vocation

Discernment of the signs of the times leads, as we have seen, to differing responses according to the possibilities which God offers in each situation. But we also find ourselves in different vocations, and in each there are specific possibilities and responsibilities, specific calls from God.

MARTIN LUTHER DEVELOPED a subtle and, I think, highly relevant theology of vocation. All of us have, he said, a number of vocations, whether we recognise them as callings from God or not. In each vocation there are imperatives which invite us to serve God and our neighbours, to do battle with our own individual and group selfishness and sin, and to make the world a better place in which people may act truthfully and well. All of us have a variety of vocations – as teacher, as parent, as politician, as minister or pastor, as citizen, as civil servant, as banker, as police officer and so on. In the fulfilment of their vocations, women and men become veils or masks for God himself, instruments of God’s love whether knowingly or not. In one’s vocation, whatever it may be, God is calling one to rise above individual and group selfishness and reach out to embrace and trust others, and serve their needs.

Pilate in his vocation as judge was called to witness to the truth by doing justice and declaring the innocent to be without blame. But he betrayed his vocation in delivering a man he knew to be innocent to death. Fulfilling his vocation involved a risk to his career. He would not trust his own calling, let alone trust the God of Israel. And so he delivered the innocent one to his death.

Max Weber, the great German sociologist, borrowed much from Martin Luther when he wrote a famous essay on ‘Politics as a Vocation’. Vocation, Weber wrote, gives you both ultimate goals, a determination to change the world into a better place, and a sense of responsibility for one’s actions. The person in public life who has a vocation is not a wind vane or someone on the make. He or she does not neglect the weak and unimportant, nor refuse to risk for the sake of convictions one’s career. The person of vocation does not give way to the mob out of fear, or sacrifice truth in the street. Sometimes the person aware of vocation reaches the point of conviction where she takes the risk of saying, like Luther, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” And if she is a believer, she adds trustingly, “So help me, God in the fulfilment of my calling.”

One person, for instance, may have a vocation as a minister, with responsibility for leading a congregation of God’s people, for being both a pastor and a prophet to them, speaking the truth in love and building the congregation up in faith and love. It is not always easy to combine the pastoral and the prophetic roles. It is easy for a minister to fail to speak the unpalatable truth that the congregation may need. Some congregations may intimidate their minister if he challenges their narrowness of vision and restricted understanding of discipleship.

Among the responsibilities of the vocation of parenthood is, by precept and example, to fill the children with excitement for the richness and diversity of humankind,

and the ability to say when they have done something wrong, “I’m sorry.” Parents have a Christian responsibility to offer to their children a lively sense of the importance of reconciliation and tolerance. And teachers, at whatever level, have this same calling and opportunity to lead children out of narrowness and the demonizing of those who are different.

In the imaginative and generous fulfilment of our various vocations, Christians are aware that they are sharing in the love and care of God, that they are ministers of reconciliation, announcing and at least in some small part exemplifying the grace of God. Doing this faithfully involves risk and it demands trust in God and in God’s purposes of reconciliation. Discipleship always does involve risk and trust. But the One who calls us will sustain us in all the risks of discipleship if we put our trust in him.

Trust and Risk

Trust is increasingly recognised as a necessary foundation for any form of life together.¹⁹ In the formal language of social science, it is not a resource that depletes by being used, but one that depletes by not being used. It is the prerequisite for co-operation. Everyone knows how important trust is in family life – trust between husband and wife, parents and children. Not to be trusted erodes one’s confidence. In order to achieve anything in social life one has to trust people when there is no certain knowledge of whether or not they are trustworthy. Often enough people become trustworthy by being treated as trustworthy. The only way to build trust is by trusting.

God in Christ entrusted himself to humankind, and called on us to put our trust in God, as God has put his trust in us, in our frailty, pride and sinfulness. The Greek word, *pistis*, is translated equally accurately as faith or as trust. For faith in God is far more than belief in God; it is essentially putting our trust in God, and in God’s good purposes. The eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is a great celebration of trust presenting a roll-call of the heroes of faith or trust of the old dispensation. Their trust in God gave substance to their hopes, we read. Their trust in God kept alive their hope for a better country in which was their true citizenship, and motivated them to courageous discipleship in this world:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.²⁰

TRUST IN GOD AND IN God's purposes of reconciliation appears as a dimension of faith, and something which cannot be confined in some religious realm, but must be expressed even in the political sphere.

We live in a society that is constantly seeking a risk-free existence. But yet we know that risk, like trust, is essential in personal relations. Unless we take risks, relations cannot grow and flourish. Children cannot grow into responsible adults unless their parents both allow them to take risks, and take risks with them. I am not talking about gung-ho risk taking, but rather about responsible willingness to take risks at the opportune moment, willingness to take

risks so that trust may grow, so that so that relationships may flourish. Risk taking is an unavoidable component of discipleship, as much in public life as in the family circle or in business. We are called to risk ourselves for others, putting our trust in God. We Christians take the risk that our faith might be misplaced, and only on the way do we discover that he in whom we put our trust is trustworthy. In discipleship we risk our selves, our careers, for others in our various vocations. And in politics too there is a need for disciples who show, in their behaviour as in their faith, that they possess the virtues of trust and risk, and undertake the ministry of reconciliation.

1 Alwyn Thomson, 'A Sorry Condition?', *Third Way*, 23/5, June 2000, pp. 8-9.
2 Matthew 12.38-42 and 16.1-4; Luke 11.16, 29-32; 12.56; Mark 8.11-12. See David Bosc, 'A Theology of "The Signs of the Times"', *Exchange*, 21/3 (1992), pp. 247-266.
3 Geraldine Smyth, in Andrew Morton, ed., *A Turning Point in Scotland and Ireland? The Challenge to the Churches and Theology Today*. Edinburgh: CTPI, 1998, p. 16.
4 The phrase is Geraldine Smyth's - *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.
5 II Corinthians 5.18-19.
6 Charles Villa-Vicencio, ed., *Between Christ and Caesar: Classical and Contemporary Texts on Church and State*. Cape Town: David Philip, 1986, pp. 256-7.
7 *Ibid.* p. 257.
8 James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury, 1975, pp. 243-4.
9 McCaughey, in Morton, ed., *A Turning Point...*, p. 36.
10 The phrase is taken from an unpublished paper by the theologian, Charles Villa-Vicencio, who was serving as Director of Research in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

11 Donald W. Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p 6.
12 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* London: Rider, 1999, p. 138.
13 Villa-Vicencio, *op.cit.*, p. 10.
14 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*. London: Rider, 1999, p. 81.
15 'The public hearings of the TRC... indeed, showed that the majority of victims and their relatives want little more than this basic knowledge': Villa-Vicencio, *op.cit.*, p. 6.
16 Tutu, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
17 *The Scotsman*, 22 August 1996.
18 On this see the essays in Alan D. Falconer and Joseph Liechty, eds., *Reconciling Memories*. Dublin: Columba, 1998.
19 See, for example, Francis Fukuyama, *Trust*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.
20 Hebrews 11.13-16 (NRSV).

This is an edited version of the third Catherwood Lecture in Public Theology delivered by Professor Duncan Forrester on 26 September 2000 at Union Theological College, Belfast. Duncan Forrester has recently retired as Professor of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology at New College, University of Edinburgh.



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