

Passion and Prejudice - An Ecumenical Exploration

By
Murdoch MacKenzie

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Unlike some of the distinguished theologians who have delivered this Lecture in the past, but like the prophet Amos, I am no prophet nor a prophet's son.¹ Academic theology and canon law are certainly not my forte but rather like a herdsman or dresser of sycamore trees, I will attempt to speak from my ecumenical experience at the grassroots of churches in a variety of settings and in so doing will hope to voice some of the hopes and fears, satisfactions and frustrations of those who used to be called the people in the pew but who these days are more likely to be worshipping in a medieval building which has been reordered with comfortable chairs and the dreaded overhead projector.

Prophet And Priest - Charisma And Institution

Amos, of course, had to tackle and indeed to outwit Amaziah the priest. He was caught in the nexus of what J. L. Mays describes as the tension between charisma and institution in Israel's religious life.² When the passion of the prophet comes up against the prejudice and vested interests of the priest it is rather like when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object which may result in meltdown. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, reported to Jeroboam king of Israel: 'Amos is conspiring against you in Israel; the country cannot tolerate what he is saying.'³ Bethel was a very ancient shrine, reputed to have been founded by Jacob⁴. After the division of the Kingdom, Jeroboam I tried to establish it as a rival to Jerusalem and it became the principal sanctuary of the Northern Kingdom. The state religion of Israel, of

which Amaziah was the servant, was an expression of its monarchy and an instrument of its politics. Amaziah's treatment of Amos when he said: 'Be off, you seer! Off with you to Judah! You can earn your living and do your prophesying there' ⁵ bears all the marks of a bureaucrat serving a monarch the maintenance of whose power is the real defining concern of the cult at Bethel. Amos confronts the politically and theologically motivated expediency of Amaziah's prejudices by claiming a charismatic authority from Yahweh himself, and proceeds with even greater passion to denounce the transgressions of Israel. The most important question both for politics and for theology, as well as for the ecumenical movement, 'By what authority?' would seem to have been answered through the passionate denunciations of the prophet. Yet, of course, the prophet was not without his own prejudices as Henry McKeating reminds us when he says:

Any healthy society needs its critics, and the prophets performed this function. In our own society the same function is fulfilled by the press, by the parliamentary opposition and by all sorts of consumer organisations and citizens' councils. But the prophet is more than all or any of these. He is first and foremost a man of God. He is a religious visionary. His criticisms therefore were felt to have a force and authority with which we should not credit the criticisms of any modern functionary, and our society, therefore, offers no real parallel to his office. It is also easy to see the prophet as an innovator, as an original thinker, impressing his own new moral insights on society and arriving at fresh ideas about religion. It would be a mistake to discount the originality of the prophets altogether, but assuredly this is not how they saw themselves. The prophet sees himself as the bearer of a tradition. He judges society by a set of standards received from the past. He is at once the most truly radical and the most truly conservative of men, for the most disturbing radicalism is that which demands that we take seriously the ancient beliefs which we already profess to hold, and put into practice the principles to which ostensibly we already adhere. The man who does demand that society take its professed beliefs with absolute seriousness, whether these beliefs be enshrined in the Sinai covenant or the Sermon on the Mount, is apt to appear simplistic, and this is how the

prophets often appear. Moreover when we hear Amos conveying God's indignation against the unrighteousness of Samaria, we can hardly help seeing it also as the expression of a countryman's disgust at what he regards as the vices of the town. ⁶

Part of our ecumenical exploration this evening will be to consider whether or not the ecumenical movement, and more particularly those with a passionate ecumenical vision, of whom there have been many distinguished examples in the twentieth century in each of our traditions, not least Richard Stewart, have been playing and can continue to play a prophetic role in relation to what some of us would consider to be the institutional prejudices of the various churches. Like Amos and the prophets they might do this best when they take with absolute seriousness those traditional beliefs which are the bedrock of our faith and of which we do need passionate reminders from time to time.

Passion And Prejudice

In a recent broadcast Inderjit Singh of the *Sikh Messenger* reminded us that Rabbi Hugo Gryn divided people into two groups - the harmonisers and the polarisers. Whilst it would be simplistic to suggest that the harmonisers are those who are ecumenical and the polarisers are the canon lawyers and ecclesiastical bureaucrats of our various church offices, there is perhaps more than a grain of truth in the suggestion. Passion or prejudice or both can be found anywhere and may exist equally within the councils of a local ecumenical partnership as in the most esoteric theological debate. The orthopraxis of the one has to take account of the orthodoxy of the other and vice versa. To do this successfully they will need to disagree without being disagreeable and to speak the truth in love. The latter is easier said than done as the top of the mind and the bottom of the heart can rouse passion or prejudice in equal measure.

I once heard Professor G.B. Caird say that the most important text in the Bible was Matthew 7:1 'Judge not, that you be not judged' which I have always thought was a salutary warning coming from someone of his insights and perception. Yet theological

judgements have to be made and can be useful if their contingency is recognised in a spirit of openness to the ultimate judgement of God. This means that they are treated as norms rather than laws which are immutable, because none of us can prejudge the infinite mercy and love of God which is as wide as the ocean and high as the heavens above. Unfortunately this is not always sufficiently understood at the level of the local church or ecumenical partnership where what appear to be the rules and regulations and theological dictats of people in far away places can cause frustration, anger and not a little passion.

A Cry From the Heart - the Agenda of the Church

Before developing these themes I would like to say a bit more about the promptings of passion and prejudice. They come both from the heart of the Gospel itself, and indeed from the heart of Jesus, a real *cri de coeur*, as well as from the world of rational secular humanism by which we are surrounded in Europe. Some of us have heard the people cry, some of them in interchurch marriages, some of them in ecumenical religious communities unable to share communion within their own community, some of them at great gatherings at Swanwick and elsewhere. Their passionate cry was so movingly expressed by Anne Doyle, and captured on the video, at the last Churches Together In England Forum when with tears in her eyes and a lump in her throat she pleaded with the church authorities to speed up the process of theological discussion.⁷ The urgency and indeed the passion of such pleas are also to be found in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter about the Jubilee of the Year 2000 as well as in *UT UNUM SINT*, the Encyclical Letter on Commitment to Ecumenism. Just listen to this urgency and this passion, first in the Jubilee document:⁸

Amongst the most fervent petitions which the Church makes to the Lord during this important time, as the eve of the new millennium approaches, is that unity among all Christians of the various confessions will increase until they reach full communion. I pray that the Jubilee will be a promising opportunity for fruitful cooperation in the many areas which unite us; these are unquestionably more numerous than those which divide us. It would thus be quite helpful if, with

due respect for the programmes of the individual Churches and Communities, ecumenical agreement could be reached with regard to the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee. In this way the Jubilee will bear witness even more forcefully before the world that the disciples of Christ are fully resolved to reach full unity as soon as possible in the certainty that "nothing is impossible with God".

Later on in a lyrical passage the Pope goes on to say: 'Seen in this light, the whole of Christian history appears to us as a single river, into which many tributaries pour their waters. The Year 2000 invites us to gather with renewed fidelity and ever deeper communion *along the banks of this great river*: the river of Revelation, of Christianity and of the Church, a river which flows through human history starting from the event which took place at Nazareth and then at Bethlehem two thousand years ago. This is truly the "river" which with its "streams" in the expression of the Psalm, "make glad the city of God" (46:4)

After emphasising the importance of penance and reconciliation the Pope says:

Among the sins which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion should certainly be counted those which *have been detrimental to the unity willed by God for his People*. In the course of the thousand years now drawing to a close, even more than in the first millennium, ecclesial communion has been painfully wounded, a fact "for which, at times, men of both sides were to blame".⁹ Such wounds openly contradict the will of Christ and are a cause of scandal to the world.¹⁰ These sins of the past still burden us and remain ever present temptations In these last years of the millennium, the Church should invoke the Holy Spirit with ever greater insistence, imploring from him the grace of Christian unity.

Likewise the opening words of *UT UNUM SINT* remind us of the *impassioned commitment* to the call for Christian unity made by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The passion of this commitment echoes and reechoes throughout the pages of *UT UNUM SINT* in such phrases as:

'believers in Christ, united in following in the footsteps of the martyrs, cannot remain divided.'

'... the threshold of the new Millennium will be an exceptional occasion, in view of which we ask the Lord to increase the unity of all Christians until they reach full communion.'

'As the Church turns her gaze to the new millennium, she asks the Spirit for grace to strengthen her own unity and to make it grow towards full communion with other Christians.'

Finally

'At the dawn of the new millennium, how can we not implore from the Lord, with renewed enthusiasm and a deeper awareness, the grace to prepare ourselves, together, to offer this *sacrifice of unity*?'¹¹

These are not my words but the words of the Holy Father and they resonate with a passion and an urgency which are truly prophetic, which view the Great Jubilee as a *kairos* moment in which new things could happen, in which meltdown could take place, in which not only debts could be released but in which peace and unity could be realised, a year of the Lord's favour, which, again in the words of the Pope could be 'a new springtime of Christian life' if Christians are open to the action of the Holy Spirit.¹² Do we have the passion? Do we share the urgency? Are we prepared to act in a prophetic role, not to break the rules but to be ahead of the rules, to be rid of our prejudices, and to return not to Rome nor even to Jerusalem but to the Lord our God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love¹³ and who repents of evil to such an extent that perhaps, as an expression of Jubilee, he would like to see remarried divorcees able to receive communion, not to mention those in interchurch marriages who are presently being crucified by our theological prejudices.

The prophet Joel, who after all we like to quote as we remember the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, with young men seeing visions and old men dreaming their dreams, the prophet Joel speaks of the coming Day of the Lord and demands that a trumpet be

blown in Zion. After pleading with them to rend their hearts and not their garments, and to return to the Lord their God, he has this remarkable passage which could well be a real Jubilee summons to each one of us in the Christian churches if we had ears to hear and eyes with which to see.

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her chamber.

Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep
and say, "Spare thy people, O Lord,
and make not thy heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"¹⁴

The World's Agenda

Which brings me to the other *cri de coeur*, that of the secular society in which we live, which at the Millennium Moment is trying to drag the Archbishop of Canterbury, kicking and screaming, to the Millennium Dome rather than to, say, the pulpit and altar of Westminster Abbey. And it is inevitable that this will happen if we leave the trumpet hanging in the hall of our divisions and prejudices, rather than allowing the sound of Jubilee to break not only the chains of debt for the world's poorest people but the chains of ecclesiastical tribalism which keep us so hermetically sealed the one from the other, so that the heritage of the Lord becomes a reproach to many people who ask 'Where is their God?'

This was illustrated in the Guardian editorial on Easter Saturday which was headed: EASTER IS DYING. The *double entendre* of this brilliant headline seemed to be completely lost on whoever wrote the editorial, though not, of course, on Don Cupitt whose 'Face to Faith' article in the same paper was quite brilliant.¹⁵ To quote the editorial: 'Like it or not, Easter is only saved from the fate of Pentecost, another crucial Christian feast which requires a huge leap of faith and which has disappeared from the secular diary, by an unholy alliance of the confectionary industry, DIY chains and garden centres. Who ever talks of Whitsun now? Perhaps in a few more decades, Good Friday will sound similarly dated.'

Unless we rend our hearts and not simply our garments and return to the Lord can we wonder if the people ask not only on Easter Saturday, but also on Easter Sunday, 'Where is their God?' If we were less fascinated by the niceties of the outward garments of our theological and ecclesiological prejudices, which, of course, we refer to as 'the truth', and were prepared to allow the Holy Spirit to rend the bottom of our hearts through a charismatic outpouring of the love of Christ which was passionate enough in its appropriation of the suffering of the *oikumene*, that even the top of our minds might undergo such a real conversion /*metanoia* that the world might once again be able to say: 'My, how these Christians love one another.' then we would no longer be a reproach to the many people who ask: 'Where is their God?'

Of course such scepticism is nothing new. It was certainly there in the Old Testament and even after the resurrection St Matthew records that when they saw him they worshipped him, but some doubted.¹⁶ As far as the roots of scepticism in our post-modern European culture are concerned many, such as Leslie Newbigin, have traced these to the Enlightenment. It was Edward Gibbon, unquestionably the greatest English historian of the 18th century, combining his enormous erudition with the philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment, who in his autobiography described his short time in Oxford as 'Port and Prejudice'. It was while in Oxford that he turned to theology and read himself into the Roman Catholic faith being received by a priest in London on June 8th 1753 and much to his father's dismay disqualifying himself from all public service and office. Having been dispatched to Lausanne and lodged with a Calvinist

minister, the Rev. Daniel Pavillard, after much weighty thought, Gibbon at last abjured his new faith and was publicly readmitted to the Protestant communion at Christmas 1754. 'It was here,' Gibbon says somewhat ambiguously, 'that I suspended my religious enquiries, acquiescing with implicit belief in the tenets and mysteries which are adopted by the general consent of Catholics and Protestants.'¹⁷

On February 17th 1776 the first quarto volume of his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published. In the last two chapters he dealt with great irony with the rise of Christianity and was attacked by those who feared that his scepticism would shake the existing establishment. In the 19th century he was hailed as a champion by militant agnostics and together with his contemporaries among *Les Philosophes* sowed the seeds of the rational secular humanism which have now borne fruit amongst many of the contributors to *The Guardian* at the end of the 20th century. Though he was unsympathetic to Christianity, his sense of fairness and probity made him respectful of honest opinion and true devotion, but he had no time for the port and prejudice which he had encountered in Oxford, any more than do the Guardian writers of today. The latter are well aware that the acids of modernity, not to mention post-modernity, have bitten so deep that the empty pews and lack of priests belie the credibility of our theological and canonical statements. A final nail in the Millennium coffin was reported in *The Asian Age* of 5th May 1999 under the headline: 'No BC, AD any more in Britain'.

This Indian newspaper reported that British radio and television broadcasters have been asked to replace references to 'Before Christ' and 'Anno Domini' in the countdown to the millennium with the more general descriptions, 'Before Christian Era' and 'Christian Era' to avoid offence to other religions. Professor David Craig, author of the report, said broadcasters should take into account the fact that every religion has a priest at its centre and a calendar. 'The assumption that Christianity has the sole claim to virtue and value is offensive to all religions' he said. So much for the great river of Revelation which flows through human history starting from the unique event which took place at Nazareth and then at Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

The Response of the Church - A Return to the Ancient Beliefs

Surrounded as we are by this world of rational, secular humanism, surely we cannot afford to bury our various denominational heads, ostrich-like, in the sand of our ecclesiastical systems. If Gibbon in the 18th century could clearly see that there was a 'general consent' between Catholics and Protestants, and if John Paul II can see that the many areas which unite us are unquestionably more numerous than those which divide us, why are we not much more passionate in dealing with our prejudices? Why don't we return with the prophets to the ancient beliefs which we already profess to hold, and put into practice the principles to which ostensibly we already adhere? Return to Mount Sinai and to the unity of the One who says: 'You shall have no other gods before me' not even those sacred cows (golden calves if you like) of your tribal and denominational allegiances. Return to the Sermon on the Mount, not only to loving our neighbours but to loving our enemies, especially the doctrinal and theological ones. Return to the Epistles and especially to Ephesians, of which Von Soden said: 'It is above all a hymn of unity,'¹⁸ in which the writer pleads with us to spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives.¹⁹ But not only Ephesians. In 1 Corinthians, St Paul appeals by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that they should all agree, that there should be no dissensions among them and that they be united in the same mind and the same judgement.²⁰ And in the beautiful hymn in Philippians, Chapter 2, St Paul pleads passionately that if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, they should complete his joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.²¹ If we go on to Colossians we have the profound vision of a cosmic reconciliation in which the Church has an essential part to play as indeed it has in Ephesians. As F.F. Bruce puts it:

In this purpose of cosmic reconciliation the Church is herself God's masterpiece of reconciliation. Not only is it composed of women and men who have individually been reconciled to God through Christ; it is composed of men and women who have also been reconciled to one another through Christ. The message of the Epistle to the Ephesians is that only through

Christ, in the fellowship of His body can iron curtains, colour bars, class warfare and all other divisions of this kind be brought to an end. In his new community 'there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman: but Christ is all, and in all' (Col.3:11).²²

But, of course, the temerity of our impassionate, so-called reconciled diversity, so popular in these islands, means that we can continue to have Methodists and Anglicans, Baptists and Roman Catholics to which any eagerness to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace hardly seems to apply. No wonder an agnostic friend of mine in Edinburgh, when I mentioned to him the ecumenical movement, described it as the eucumical movement.

As Robert Burns said long ago:

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!

Truth and Authority

But what about authority, that key question for the prophets? And what about truth and speaking the truth in love? Surely truth is not propositional but personal. As someone said: 'The Word became flesh, and we have turned him into words again. In *UT UNUM SINT* the Holy Father says: 'Love for the truth is the deepest dimension of any authentic quest for full communion between Christians.'²⁴ But that truth cannot be equated with the teaching of the Church but can only be equated with Christ himself. We do well to heed the warning of Samuel Taylor Coleridge; 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all.'²⁵ St Thomas Aquinas summed up the personal nature of truth when he wrote:

What God's Son has told me, take for true I do;
Truth himself speaks truly or there's nothing true.²⁶

'I am the way, and the truth, and the life;' says Jesus.²⁷ Those in local churches and in ecumenical partnerships passionately believe that they have the authority of Christ himself to walk in his way, to know his truth and to live his life and that this involves crossing the boundaries of their churches and loving one another as Christ loves them. Like the Pope, but unlike some of the more local religious authorities with whom they have to deal, they believe that the movement for Christian unity is *not just some sort of appendix* which is added to the Church's traditional activity but is 'an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does.'²⁸ But when they try to put all this into practice they find that their ecumenical aspirations are thwarted by the prejudicial structures of their denominations. Like Amos of old, they find that they have still to try to outwit the Amaziah's of this world, whose agenda often has more to do with pride and prejudice and what seems to them to be a politically and theologically motivated expediency in maintaining the status quo. They wonder how long it will be for the brave words of Swanwick 1987 to be put into practice, words which required a 'shift in the thinking, feeling and action of our churches from ecumenism as an extra, which absorbs energy, to ecumenism as a dimension of all that we do, which releases energy through the sharing of resources.' It was said at Swanwick that 'this shift needs to be effective at all levels and in all places in order to establish a radically new style of working which builds on the creative ecumenical relationships of the many rather than the ecumenical activities of the few.'²⁹ How long, O Lord, how long?

Sharing The Eucharist

Finally, to come to the vexed question of eucharistic hospitality and to the question as to whether it will ever be possible, without much more passion and a lot less prejudice, to actually move from cooperation to commitment and from commitment to communion? Perhaps you know the little book *The Millennium Jubilee* issued by CAFOD. In the chapter 'Towards a Just Millennium' Ed O'Connell SSC writes:

The year 2000 is to be intensely Eucharistic. During this year, the Church around the world should work to overcome the dramatic gaps between people and bring divided people around the same table: wealthy and poor, North and South, employed and unemployed, peoples divided by cultures, fears and discriminations ... the list could be endless.'³⁰

Of course it could and I wonder if in any way it might just include Catholics and Protestants gathering around the same table, because until we do we will find that the world continues to believe that Easter is Dying ! It is sometimes said in defence of Roman Catholic exclusivity in these matters that Jesus said: 'So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.'³¹ Well if that is so, and who could doubt that it is so, then we would have no more eucharists, a moratorium on Communion and the Mass, until such time that we were sure that we had so spoken the truth in love that we were at peace with one another, and then and then only, dare we utter the words and declare that we who are many are one body because we all share the one bread. Perhaps then we will hear the voice of Jesus from the shores of the Sea of Galilee issuing his personal invitation to each one of us to come and have breakfast.

I would like to thank you for allowing me to air my own prejudices with such passion this evening, and for those of you who, like Dick Stewart, have set your hands to the ecumenical plough, I leave you with words of President Woodrow Wilson who said: 'I would rather fail in a cause which will one day conquer, than conquer in a cause which will one day fail.'

Notes and References

- 1 Amos 7:14
- 2 James L Mays, *Amos*, SCM Press Ltd 1969 p.134
- 3 Amos 7:10
- 4 Genesis 28:10-19
- 5 Amos 7:12

- 6 Henry McKeating, 'Amos, Hosea, Micah', *The Cambridge Bible Commentary* 1971 p. 4
- 7 *Moving On as One Churches Together in England* Video 1997
- 8 'The Jubilee of the Year 2000' - Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II 10th Nov 1994 Sections 16, 25, 34
- 9 Second Vatican Ecumenical Council Decree on Ecumenism - *Unitatis Redintegratio* 3
- 10 Cf. *ibid.*, 1
- 11 *Ut Unum Sint* Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II on Commitment to Ecumenism, Ascension Day 1995, Sections 1,3,102
- 12 'The Jubilee of the Year 2000', Section 18
- 13 Joel 2:13
- 14 Joel 2:15-17
- 15 Don Cupitt 'Saturday night fervour' - *The Guardian* April 3rd 1999 Obituaries p.22
- 16 Matthew 28:17
- 17 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1979 vol 8 pg 153
- 18 *The History of Early Christian Literature*, p.292, quoted in the Epistle to the Ephesians - John A Allan, *Torch Bible Commentaries* p. 33 SCM Press Ltd 1959
- 19 Ephesians 4:3
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- 21 Philippians 2:1-2
- 22 F.F. Bruce *The Epistle to the Ephesians* p.17 Pickering and Inglis Ltd 1961
- 23 Robert Burns *Poems and Songs* 'To a Louse'
- 24 *Ut Unum Sint* Section 36
- 25 S.T. Coleridge *Aids to Reflection: Moral and Religious Aphorisms* xxv
- 26 St Thomas Aquinas quoted in *Dictionary of Religious Quotations* - Margaret Pepper p. 423, Andre Deutsch 1989
- 27 John 14:6
- 28 *Ut Unum Sint* Section 20
- 29 *Churches Together in Pilgrimage*, British Council of Churches and the Catholic Truth Society 1989 p. 3
- 30 *The Millennium Jubilee*, CAFOD, 1996 p. 12
- 31 Matthew 5:23-24