



Faith in the Police

18 February 2018

Lord Blair of Boughton

Acts 11: 11–18 1 Corinthians 13: 4–end

Thank you for asking me to come again to Trinity College Chapel. Looking at the addresses given by other speakers in this series, my own address tonight on 'Faith in the Police' will be a little different. It will not be about how Christian beliefs shaped my working life, because I think those beliefs did that only in the most general sense of a confirmed commitment as a police officer to fairness and justice. Instead I intend to explain how my final years in the police took me on an unexpected journey, certainly arising from my Christian faith, along, for me, previously untrodden paths towards acceptance – indeed, joyful acceptance – of other faiths. The Woolf Institute, of which I am Chair of Trustees, is the leading academic centre in the UK for the study of relationships between Jews, Christians and Muslims. Its very new building is just a few 100 yards away from here at the start of Madingley Road, next to Westminster College.

So, just exactly how and why did a former police officer, however senior, end up at the Woolf Institute? And what exactly is the connection between its work and the readings we have heard tonight? The answer to both those questions is my growing understanding of the inclusivity, the revolutionary inclusivity, of Christ's new covenant.

One more introductory remark: I recently gave a version of this address to some ordinands at Cuddesdon theological college. As you will see, the story begins with the response of the Metropolitan Police to the racist murder of the young black man, Stephen Lawrence, in 1993 and then to the judicial enquiry into that much criticised response. I was a bit shocked when one of the ordinands – admittedly rather young – had never heard of Stephen Lawrence. So I will expand that bit of the story.

In 2000, I became Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, second in command of that vast organisation with its more than 50,000 staff, with a clear brief from the Home Secretary to lead its response to the findings of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry.

I had first joined the Metropolitan Police Service in 1974, coming down from your sister college in Oxford, Christ Church, leaving London in 1994 to work in Thames Valley and then Surrey Police. What I found on my return to London in 2000 was a force struggling to deal with a multi-ethnic city, with some of its boroughs being in the position that the phrase 'minority population' no longer had any sensible meaning, a force which was trying to work in a colour-blind way, whereas it needed to police in response to the different

experiences and expectations of its citizens. A force that was palpably failing to do that and palpably failing to recruit many ethnic minority officers: above all, a force that had been judged by the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry to be 'institutionally racist', a phrase which had outraged and demoralised the workforce.

One of the Met's responses was to create an advisory committee of its most trenchant critics to answer the question: 'OK, how would you police London?' This led me down long paths of negotiation, compromise and eventually understanding and good friendship with representatives and community leaders of many backgrounds. Diversity was not only the means but part of the goal itself.

Then came the bombings of 7/7, just over four months after I had become Commissioner. This was the largest single loss of life caused by a criminal act in England for centuries. It was a Thursday.

After 7/7, I had cleared my diary of virtually everything. But I noticed that I had agreed to speak on the next Tuesday to a group called the Three Faiths Forum. I had never before spoken to an inter-faith group. I cannot now recall why I had agreed to do so in the first place. However, somehow it seemed to me that a meeting between the representatives of Judaism, Islam and Christianity might be a very important place to go, right then.

And I did and I am so glad I did. Because in that room I understood that what I had learned in the last few years about race was now going to have to be reinterpreted about faith. In order to protect our people, we were going to need to understand what could have led four British born Muslims to kill themselves and 52 others in London, ostensibly in the name of Islam. Three days later, I was in a Mosque joining Friday prayers; from there, I went to a Sikh Gurdwara and a Hindu temple with the message, televised on the main TV channels, that this was a criminal act by individuals, not whole communities.

Afterwards, I learned more than any Commissioner before me about Islam, from Sunni to Shi-ite to Sufi, through the history of the Muslim Brotherhood to the nature of Wahabism, the austere Saudi version of the faith that lies behind so much of the current clash with the West. What I understood, dimly, was that we had to embrace all our citizens, including almost three million Muslims, to find a truly collective way of denouncing violence of this sort.

However, there are obstacles lying in the way of interfaith dialogue. Firstly, Christianity and Islam in particular are evangelising faiths and, wherever one faith is in the majority, interfaith dialogue can be seen as suspect.

Secondly, each of the Abrahamic faiths has a claim to exclusivity. The Holy Qur'an is described as *'the one and only, final revelation of God'*. The Jewish people have clung, through millennia of persecution, to direct heredity as a key aspect of faith. And then there is one of the central tenets of Christianity, the phrase in the Gospel according to St John, chapter 4, verse 6: *Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.*

This evening I want to explore that phrase, so well known to many of us. Is it really true that there is only one path to salvation or are there many paths up the mountain? Before I do that, I want to make clear that the path I have chosen is that of Anglicanism, with a firm belief in the divinity of Jesus. But ...

In addition to noting that this phrase appears only in John, I think there are four points which affect the weight that must be accorded to this passage.

Firstly and most importantly, it stands in direct contrast to so many of the other words and deeds of Christ, who outraged the Pharisees by mingling with publicans and sinners, who enjoyed the company of women not of his family, very unusual at the time, who appeared first to one of them after His Resurrection, who made a fallen woman his closest friend and who protected an adulteress. He spoke at length to the Samaritan woman – an apostate to the Jews – at the well and then stayed in her village. Jesus preached at and stayed on the Mount of Olives, the subject of tonight's anthem. This was then the site of Jerusalem's leper colony. He was inclusive above all.

The temple in Jerusalem was divided into concentric courts, first the court of the Gentiles into which anyone could go, then the court of the Jews open to both men and women, then one only for Jewish men, then one only for priests and then the Holy of Holies, which could be entered only by the High Priest, and only on one day a year. Jesus stands directly against this exclusivity. And reaching out from him stands St Peter, first moving away from the Jewish dietary laws and then, as we have just heard, baptising gentiles, just as Simeon had predicted.

Secondly, set against that, I am not sure at all that I believe in the medieval doctrine of Limbo, to house the souls of the worthy who were born before Christ. And I do not think I believe that Christ's capacity for infinite love does not include them or the unbaptised, for whatever reason.

Thirdly, this is the world of now. Through the processes of the Reformation, Counter Reformation and Enlightenment, Christianity has for centuries adapted its understanding of God's purposes to changing circumstances. It led the fight against slavery; it has adjusted largely to womens' and gay rights; it has accepted the theory of evolution and pronounced Genesis to be an allegory; and now it stands against the challenges of globalisation and practices advocacy for the rights of others, Christian or not. A claim to absolute exclusivity sits uneasily with our past.

And then, lastly, Christian Unity: I realise now that I have always groaned inwardly when asked to pray for Christian unity. If Jesus really wanted it to happen, He does not seem to have put His shoulder strongly to the wheel. Within a very short time after His death, disagreement began as to the way forward between St Peter and St James, the brother of Jesus. It has not stopped since.

Both here and in Oxford, where my wife, Felicity, and I now live, there are more varieties of tradition within Anglicanism than in most places, from the highest of the high to the most guitar spangled of house churches. And then there are Methodists and Greek Orthodox, Catholics, Baptists and Copts, Lutherans and Evangelicals. If there is only one path up the mountain, then it has an awful lot of tributary paths, on which we all seem to spend a great deal of our lives.

In contrast, the words of Rabbi Marc Shapiro are worth noting. After long dialogue with members of the Jain faith, trying to reconcile it with Judaism – in which he failed – he wrote in 1999: 'Then, at one point, it dawned on me and I began to laugh as the idol of a false unity

was toppled and the wonder of diversity was affirmed. I laughed with joy at our different paths and at the fundamental pathlessness of Truth. There was something in the act of listening, of speaking, of taking the other to heart that opened my heart to ineffable wonder'.

Since then the world has continued to darken. Across the world, dreadful deeds are being done in the name of every faith. And yet all the world's religions have compassion at their heart. It is for those of us who know that to be lights together against that darkness.

A Muslim hashtag has arisen in the UK about Islamic State called 'Notinmyname'. Amen to that. But we of other faiths have to reach out to Muslims and reassure them that we do not see all of them, or most of them, or hardly any of them, as supporters of such vileness. And to do that, without losing our own path, we have to look at ourselves and our view of the paths of others. There is a lovely hymn which begins with the words *There's a wideness in God's mercy that's like the wideness of the sea*. One verse contains these words:

*But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify its strictness
With a zeal he would not own.*

I usually avoid theological terms but can I remind you of or introduce you to Philoxenia? It goes back to Genesis 18 and the story of Abraham receiving the Angel of the Lord as a guest, repeated in St Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 13: *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares*. Philoxenia means *the friendship of strangers*. It is the exact opposite to Xenophobia. It surely is a fulfilment of one of two of Christ's main commandments: *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*.

We live in real time. Muslims in Britain feel under pressure, a 'watched' community. Some parts of our media mix up immigration and terrorism and Islam into a heady mix representing the 'other', who are to be feared and excluded. The church needs to stand openly against this, not just in policy but in deeds.

A few days after 7/7, the then Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, spoke at the first, rather makeshift memorial service for the dead and injured. He said that 'It is believed that there are over 300 languages spoken in London but there is one universal language, the language of tears'. I think that was the phrase that sent me to Woolf. I became interested in the Institute, of which I have only recently become chair because it – seemingly uniquely – combines two approaches.

It provides on-line and direct courses on interfaith dialogue and history from first degree through to post-doctoral level and some of those courses are being taken simultaneously by individuals in Gaza, Tel Aviv and Teheran. Equally, however, the Institute is determined to take its learning directly into the real world, delivering courses to the NHS about end of life care for different faith communities, for instance, and on the politics of religion to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It is currently examining the nature of truth in the public square, an initiative partially sponsored by the Vatican, and it recently published the results of its Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life.

I can do no better than to end with the words of Mother Theresa:

Our purpose is to take God and his love to the poorest of the poor, irrespective of their ethnic origin or the faith that they profess. Our discernment of aid is not the belief but the necessity. We never try to convert those who receive to Christianity but in our work we bear witness to the love of God's presence and if Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists or agnostics become for this better men or women – simply better – we will be satisfied. Growing up in love, they will be nearer God and will find him in his goodness.

Quite so. That great paean to the God of love from 1 Corinthians 13 which was read earlier suggests that we should not be too certain about false limits of our own when, as the King James' Bible puts it so beautifully, we now see but 'through a glass, darkly.' As our first hymn tonight, *Immortal, Invisible*, suggests, we do not know what will be at the top of the mountain when we get there and only 'faith, hope and charity abideth, these three', especially if the 'greatest of these is charity': infinite love itself.