

Sermon

Sunday 30th August, 2009

Lessons

Deuteronomy 4: 1 – 2, 6 – 8

St Mark 7: 1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 – 23

Jesus said, ‘There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man.’

St Mark 7: 15

On Thursday, 20th August, 2009 the Scottish Justice Secretary, Kenny MacAskill, announced the release of the convicted Libyan terrorist, Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al Megrahi. On Friday last, the BBC commissioned an opinion poll which found that 60% of the Scottish people thought that the Justice Secretary was wrong and 32% thought that he was right. 11% believe that Scotland’s reputation and standing in the world has gone up, while 74% believe that the Scottish Government has been damaged by this decision and that Scotland’s reputation abroad has been damaged. At the end of this sermon, I imagine that there will be some people here today who will largely agree with what I have to say, and others who will not. There may be people in this congregation this morning who have a connection with one of the victims of the terrorist attack, but it would be culpable on the part of a parish minister in Scotland not to address this topic. After all, Mr MacAskill’s decision has been discussed and is being discussed all over the world. Jesus said, ‘There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man.’

On Wednesday 21st December, 1988, the Pan American World Airways third daily scheduled transatlantic flight from London's Heathrow Airport to the John F Kennedy International Airport was destroyed by a bomb, killing all 243 passengers, 16 crew and 11 people from the town of Lockerbie. Indicted in 1991, Megrahi was convicted of involvement in the bombing in 2001 and sentenced to life imprisonment. The Justice Secretary said that the decision to release Mr Megrahi was taken on grounds of compassion. He justified his decision with these words:

Section three of the Prisoners and Criminal Proceedings (Scotland) Act 1993 gives the Scottish Ministers the power to release prisoners on licence on compassionate grounds. The Act requires that Ministers are satisfied that there are compassionate grounds justifying the release of a person serving a sentence of imprisonment. Although the Act does not specify what the grounds for compassionate release are, guidance from the Scottish Prison Service, who assess applications, suggests that it may be considered where a prisoner is suffering from a terminal illness and death is likely to occur soon. There are no fixed time limits but life expectancy of less than three months may be considered an appropriate period. The guidance makes it clear that all prisoners, irrespective of sentence length, are eligible to be considered for compassionate release. That guidance dates from 2005.....

[Mr Megrahi] was diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer in September 2008....It is quite clear to the medical experts that he has a terminal illness, and indeed that there has recently been a significant deterioration in his health....A report dated 10 August from the Director of Health and Care for the Scottish Prison Service indicates that a 3 month prognosis is now a reasonable estimate. He may die sooner - he may live longer.

The First Minister has said, 'Sometimes in life and politics and in government, there's no easy option available. You have to take hard choices because you think and believe you're doing the right thing....'. Mr Mueller, the Director of

the FBI, said he was ‘outraged’ at an ‘inexplicable action’ that is ‘detrimental to the cause of justice’, ‘makes a mockery of the rule of law’, and ‘gives comfort to terrorists’. He also said the decision makes ‘a mockery of the grief of the families...’. Mr Megrahi returned to Libya amid jubilant scenes which included people waving Scottish flags. Saif al Islam al Gaddafi claimed the proposed prisoner transfer deal with Britain had targeted Megrahi and was linked to talks on trade and oil, but that his release on compassionate grounds was completely unrelated to commerce. Buckingham Palace has confirmed that the Duke of York will not be going to Libya on a trade trip next month. Mr MacAskill is not a gifted orator and the questions and comments which he faced in the emergency session of Parliament were very far from challenging or inspiring. For what it is worth, in my view, one MSP stood out from the others: Malcolm Chisholm, a Labour MSP and former minister, told parliament:

Can I regret the politicisation of what is a quasi-judicial decision, and for my part commend the justice secretary for a courageous decision, which is entirely consistent with both the principles of Scots law and Christian morality, as evidenced by the widespread support of churches across Scotland.

Jesus said, ‘There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man.’ What do we mean when we speak of compassion? There is nothing that will take away the tragedy of the bombing of the Pan Am flight. I am not sure if we can begin to imagine what it must have felt like to learn that your loved

one was on that flight or that your loved one was one of the eleven killed by the falling debris. The act was cold and calculated and it was evil: evil in intention and deed. Jesus said, 'The things which come out of a man, those are the things which defile him.' Those who planned and executed the bombing are defiled by their thoughts and deeds. The thing about evil and its consequences is that there is no going back: no one can undo what has happened, not even God. It is done and it was evil. But what do we mean when we speak of compassion?

If I had one issue with what was said by the Justice Secretary, it was his reference to Megrahi's terminal cancer as a sentence imposed by a 'higher power'. If by a 'higher power' Mr MacAskill was referring to God, then I think – on this matter - he is a better justice secretary than he is a theologian. It is bad theology to suggest that God would inflict terminal cancer on Mr Megrahi, intervene in history to give this man cancer, when He did not intervene twenty years ago to save the lives of 270 people. Mr MacAskill's bad theology in this instance aside, what do we mean when we speak of compassion?

The evil cannot be undone. The Director of the FBI said that the decision to release the prisoner is detrimental to the cause of justice. What do we mean by justice? I imagine that the Director was referring to retributive justice; in other

words, how we regulate our response to criminal acts and the punishments we impose being in proportion to the severity of the crime. In this case, Mr Megrahi, having been found guilty, was sentenced to life imprisonment. Given that we do not have the death penalty and nor do we torture prisoners, life imprisonment was the most severe punishment available to the courts. In other words, justice was done. That still leaves the question: what do we mean when we speak of compassion?

In the Gospel of St Matthew, chapter 5, Jesus makes a disturbing statement:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In his Letter to the Church in Rome, St Paul wrote, ‘Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’ The theologian, John Swinton, says:

Often our first instinct, when we are faced with the consequences of evil, is to seek revenge.....To take revenge on others is to deliberately inflict harm on them in response to some form of injury or insult, the object being to get personal or communal satisfaction.....

But the problem with revenge is that it makes all of us evil.¹

¹ John Swinton *Raging with Compassion* p136

The Canadian philosopher Trudy Govier talks about revenge in these terms:

From a moral point of view, the desire to bring harm to another so that one may contemplate with satisfaction that harm and one's role in bringing it about is an evil desire. When we seek revenge, we do so in order to take pleasure in the fact that the offender has been made to suffer and it is we who have brought this about, as a response to the fact that this person has wronged us. What is wrong with revenge is that to act as agents of revenge, we have to indulge and cultivate something evil in ourselves, the wish to deliberately bring suffering to another human being and contemplate that suffering for our own satisfaction and enjoyment.²

Jesus said, 'The things that come out of a man, those are the things which defile him.' That applies to Mr Megrahi and to all of us.

Once we define a fellow human being as a murderer, a terrorist, as a monster, then we free ourselves to treat that person in a way that is less than moral.

Jesus did not say, 'Do to others what they have done to you.' He said, 'Just as you want others to do to you, you also do to them likewise.' In other words, your humanity, your dignity, stature and morality are the standard by which you should treat others, not how they have treated you. Do not defile yourself; do not seek revenge; do not turn yourself into a person driven by blind hatred; do not begin to think like the one who offended you, hurt you, dehumanised you. Revenge does not take away hurt. In speaking of a higher power, the Justice Secretary displayed poor theology. He more than redeemed himself in his closing paragraph. Mr MacAskill said:

²Trudy Govier *Forgiveness and Revenge* p13

In Scotland, we are a people who pride ourselves on our humanity. It is viewed as a defining characteristic of Scotland and the Scottish people. The perpetration of an atrocity and outrage cannot and should not be a basis for losing sight of who we are, the values we seek to uphold, and the faith and beliefs by which we seek to live. Mr Al-Megrahi did not show his victims any comfort or compassion. They were not allowed to return to the bosom of their families to see out their lives, let alone their dying days. No compassion was shown by him to them.

But that alone is not a reason for us to deny compassion to him and his family in his final days. Our justice system demands that judgment be imposed but compassion be available. Our beliefs dictate that justice be served, but mercy be shown. Compassion and mercy are about upholding the beliefs that we seek to live by, remaining true to our values as a people. No matter the severity of the provocation or the atrocity perpetrated.

That has got to be one of the bravest and most outstanding statements of Christian theology I have ever heard from a politician. Was Mr MacAskill right? I believe he was.

Amen.