

18th November 2006-11-06
St Bride's Church, Fleet Street, 6.30pm
PEN service to mark The Day of the Imprisoned Writer

ADDRESS ON THE THEME – PEACE

A week ago I was standing on Robben Island. As the tourist cameras snapped away I could hardly bear to gawp at the cell in which Nelson Mandela spent 18 years, so walked back out into the bleak yard in which the great man attempted his garden: green in the midst of grey sterility. I thought about tonight – when we would be gathering to remember so many others imprisoned for expressing their beliefs – and realised the tremendous honour of being asked to speak. It was Remembrance Sunday too, and normally I would be in my local church, wearing a poppy.

The boat journey back to the mainland was choppy and Table Mountain wore its cloth of cloud. I went into the Robben Island Museum shop and bought postcards with significant quotations on them. For example here is Indres Naidoo, Prisoner 885/63, who served 10 years, writing on the significance of the place:

‘For centuries thousands of people were banished or imprisoned on the Island. Hundreds died there. The Island was universally known as a place of cruelty and brutality. Today Robben Island is a prison no more. UNESCO has declared it a World Heritage Site and it is protected as a national monument. Thousands of people visit the Island every day. Ordinary tourists as well as world leaders come to pay their homage to everything the island symbolises, particularly those who suffered and those who gave their lives for freedom, justice and peace.’

The contradiction within those admirable sentiments is what forced me to think further about tonight. What were we *doing* there on Robben Island rolling around in a tour bus to squint at the lime quarry where those men did hard labour under the eyes of brutal guards? Taking part in another act of remembrance – yes. But how could we ‘pay homage’ in any way to the ignorance, injustice, prejudice, fear and hatred which sent political prisoners like Mandela – Prisoner 466/64 who served 27 years in all - to Robben Island, just as it had banished lepers years before? And crucially, is it not simplistic – even, dare I say, sentimental – to yoke together ‘justice and peace’ in that easy, comforting phrase?

You see, I was asked to talk on the theme of peace tonight, but standing in Cell Block 15 on Robben Island, all I could think about was how the struggle against injustice usually involves some sort of violence – ‘to take up arms against a sea of troubles’ interpreted literally. Nelson Mandela famously spoke of his willingness to die for his ideal ‘of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony’ – and the painful truth is that when some are prepared to die for a dream, others are prepared to kill.

When Bishop Tutu gave his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in 1984 he said this: ‘We in the South African Council of Churches have said we are opposed to all forms of violence – that of a repressive and unjust system, and that of those who seek to overthrow that system. However we have added that we understand those who say they have had to adopt what is a last resort for them. ‘

The barbed wire and watchtowers of the Island conjured up inevitable images of concentration camps, and with them – of course - that idea of the just struggle, the just war. Those British soldiers who walked into the horror of Belsen, liberating that prison and many others, had right on their side, like the American troops who rolled into Paris - and we would not have preached non-violence to the French resistance fighter committing acts of terror against the Nazis and the Vichy regime. None of the writers we are remembering today – those persecuted, imprisoned, even killed, for challenging oppression – would support the notion of peace at any price. The cost is far too high.

You don’t think of such complexities when you’re young and wear a CND badge. Then it seems as simple as the Miss World contestant who, when asked what she most wants, simpers ‘World Peace’ and gets a great round of applause. At sixteen I could chant ‘No more war!’ and mean it. That was the era of Cold War, and peace songs in folk clubs ...‘*When will they ever learn?*’and the fear of nuclear fallout in milk, and standing – as I did at 17 – for hours on a vigil outside the Houses of Parliament on the coldest Easter Saturday night for decades, hands numb from the weight of the CND placard. You’re so proud of yourself at that age for being aware – but of what? That war is hateful and all people should live in harmony? Rocket science!

Here is Exhibit 1.

At 19 I embroidered the words ‘Peace’ and ‘Love’ on this denim cap, and believed in flower power. How silly. For by the time I was 21 complexity intruded. In 1968, with my new husband I marched into Grosvenor Square to protest against the Vietnam War. At one point a young policeman became separated from his line and fell to the ground, his helmet rolling away. He covered his head with his hands, as a group of baying youths and girls – all presumably believing in peace and love as well as the unassailable sanctity of Ho Chi Min – surrounded him ready to administer a good kicking.

Without thinking I jumped in, yelling at them to leave him alone....for who was the enemy there? American policy, or the British police? I loathed the indiscriminate violence of those protesting against war. I was embarrassed by a hoard of middle-class students mouthing ‘Ho Ho Ho Chi Min, We shall fight and we shall win’...when it was young Americans and Vietnamese who were fighting and dying in an unjust war, equalised in the loss of light and love – in the death which levels us all, friend and foe alike.

Nothing would ever seem simple again.

Writers know about such things. Paradox is part of their armoury – the knowledge that the peacenik can be savage, and soldiers can keep the peace. Novelists, journalists, poets, essayists and dramatists alike use the power of words to challenge injustice, rage against

oppression and cruelty, poke fun at fundamentalism, point out contradictions, and illuminate the possible. Because oppression deals in simplicities it tries to silence them, but that's like trying to put out the stars. Writers gifted with the power of imagination - which is greater than the power of governments or tyrants - know that the only way to any sort of salvation on earth is through listening to the truth of that imagination. It's the only hope.

Look at the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Socrates spoke of world citizenship, Marcus Aurelius and Zeno the Stoic envisioned a world community, Virgil imagined a peace which would be as universal as the Roman Empire, and so on - and then the great philosopher Kant called worldwide peace the 'cosmopolitical ideal'. He thought it unattainable, of course - but held that because it is right it must be pursued despite its impossibility.

Since 1945 the world has only been about 26 days without war. When she accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the Society of Friends in 1947 Margaret Backhouse said: 'Today as we live in the shadow of two great wars, we are all conscious not only of the horror of war itself, but of all the aftermath of human misery - starvation, homelessness, and many other forms of physical suffering. We know too of the greater evils of lowered morality, bitterness, violence and self interest that sow the seeds of misunderstanding and strife.'

That was 59 years ago, and all we have to do is look around us today and weep for the truth of the protest songs. The answer to 'Where have all the flowers gone?' is to be seen at the burials of young men of every nationality and belief who die in conflict. 'When will they ever learn?,' sung softly, is drowned by the cries of children all over the world who are the real victims of war.

How can we make a conscious choice to live as though peace were possible, despite all the evidence to the contrary? By understanding that there is far more to the idea of peace than merely the absence of war. That's not enough - after all, a lack of conflict can be the result of totalitarianism, where the writers are silenced and opposition denied. We require more of the *Pax*. It must involve presence, as well as absence. It starts with the inner peace of one individual, spreading from person to person. And that's not sentimental. How can there be peace between nations without forgiveness and reconciliation between people? If we feel overwhelmed by the enormity of suffering in the world, and when the struggle for justice seems impossible - this at least is one thing to cling to.

Reading Nobel Peace lectures made by great people from Albert Schweitzer through the Dali Lama to the Kenyan environmental activist Wangari Maathai (the first African woman to be awarded the prize) I was powerfully struck by one constant theme - the belief that, despite the fact that the Seven Deadly Sins seem to rule the world and are certainly behind all wars (think of Pride, Anger and Greed for a start) - the human spirit *is* capable of challenging their power. It always has and it always will. This is the truth for which the imagination yearns.

In 1947 the Quaker Margaret Backhouse said simply, 'Love is very infectious'. In 1954 Dr Schweitzer said 'All men, even the semi-civilised...are beings capable of compassion, able to develop a humanitarian spirit. It abides with them like tinder ready to be lit, waiting only for the spark.' In 1989 the Dalai Lama spoke of 'the true value of altruism, love, compassion and non-violence' and said 'No matter what part of the world we come from we are all the same human beings.' In 2004 Wangari Matthai honoured those who 'work quietly and often without recognition to protect the environment, promote democracy, defend human rights and ensure equality between women and men. By so doing, they plant the seeds of peace.'

And of course, in '93 Nelson Mandela – who had served 27 years in all) praised 'those countless human beings...(who) had the nobility of spirit to stand in the path of tyranny and injustice, without seeking selfish gain. They recognised that an injury to one is an injury to all and therefore acted together in defence of justice and a common human decency.'

And that take me back to the country I just visited – and Exhibit 2. I've called this remarkable creature Pingy. There he is! He's made of recycled black plastic by a young woman called Orienda who sits every day in a dark room in a township on the Cape flats and makes her creatures. She's hugely proud of them – the chickens, lions, ducks and mad pink and black zebras which will be sold to a supplier who puts them into tourist shops. Orienda wanted her photograph taken with me; she smiled when I called her my South African sister. This ridiculous creature – her penguin is a symbol of the human ability to create, to work – even when you have very little. To make something out of nothing – presence from absence, positive from negative. And our moment of sisterhood was one of innumerable such moments, happening everywhere all the time – which create sparks to light the beacon of peace.

Whatever its grave problems, the new South Africa must stand as a symbol that – it may take generations - things *can* be made better. The obscenity of White Only benches is consigned to museums. In the smartest restaurant in Cape Town a white couple and a black couple sat down to dinner – which could never have happened in the old dispensation. Nor would tourists go on township tours, to witness how real people live real lives – seeking happiness and trying to avoid pain, just like their brothers and sisters all over the world. One of the many lessons of history is that inch by inch we do make progress. If we gave up believing in that we'd want to die.

And maybe that's why I shouldn't see this little vintage hat as silly, idealistic, outmoded. Maybe I should wear it with pride (*putting the cap on*) – unashamed of the old message of peace and love - as I read you the words of one of the great old men of Robben Island, Ahmed Kathrada, who was imprisoned for 26 years, during which he kept a secret commonplace book of quotations from writers who inspired him - just as they inspire us tonight.

The postcard says, 'While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we would not want Robben Island to be a monument of our hardship and suffering. We would want it to be a triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil. A triumph of wisdom and largeness against small minds and pettiness. A triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness.'

No bitterness there – but the authentic voice of imagination, pride and hope. The unquestioning assertion that life has meaning and value, and that good *will* triumph.

With proof like that how can we not believe in the inner peace which is the first step to greater peace? As Bishop Richard Holloway has pointed out....we have to pay this world of ours a compliment it may not deserve by living as though its purposes are tolerance and compassion, love and peace. And if the world proves us wrong? Then at least our lives will have defied cynicism, despair and indifference. At least we will, in the words of W.H. Auden, 'show an affirming flame.'

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