

## Good Friday 2017

### Seeing through the eyes of Jesus



The aim of these addresses, first delivered on Good Friday 2017, was to take time to look at some of the issues faced by the world through the eyes of Jesus as he hangs dying on the cross. I said that I could not promise an easy listen over the three hours for there are so many challenges us as we try to be disciples of Christ.

I have been asked to make the addresses available and so here they are. Please feel free to use them as you wish—although words printed in italics are quotes from other people and so they need to be treated with the usual respect if anybody wishes to publish any part of this in another form. I would obviously be grateful for anybody who wishes to make use of my words to make contact first.

David Meakin April 2017

## First Address—Introduction

Bishop Steven began his presidential address at the recent Diocesan Synod with these words:

*“They have treated the wounds of my people carelessly” says the prophet Jeremiah of the leaders of his day.*

*“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying “Peace, peace” where there is no peace” (Jeremiah 8.11).*

He went on to present his early ideas about how this diocese should move forward and his ideas are really very powerful – in short he wishes us to become a church which is more Christ-like – a Church which seeks to end fragmentation by being contemplative, compassionate and courageous.

And to do all of that will require us to be radical – to look at the world through Jesus eyes and to ask what the appropriate response might be.

And that is what I want to attempt to do in a number of different ways this afternoon as we watch and wait with Jesus hanging on the cross. Hanging there for us – life slowly ebbing from his body.

Some will remember that Canon Russell Bowman-Eadie came and spent Holy Week with us a few years ago. He began the first of his Good Friday reflections with these words:

*Unlike that much talked about Mel Gibson film **The Passion of the Christ** the evangelists spare us the details of the real horror and despair of this kind of death by crucifixion. It wasn't just a terrible form of dying -- it was a terrible form of living.*

*Unlike hanging, electrocution or the firing squad –its purpose wasn't just to kill -- but to display the prisoner naked and alive in an extended period of helplessness.*

*A feast for flies - and relentless exposure to the heat of the midday sun. And death normally came not because of wounds, blood loss, but through exposure.. exhaustion... and slow suffocation as the weight of the body causes it to implode on itself.*

*Jesus is the helpless victim of human rejection and brutality.*

*The bitter irony is of course that he's sentenced to death by the respectable -- by those who live good upright lives according to their religious law. By an elite High Priesthood who asked for it and Pilate who delivered it. Jesus is crucified by the system – And those who tolerate a society which keeps an underclass - a people with no effective rights or voice, identify themselves with those who crucified Jesus -- even if they are sometimes charitable, caring individuals. So, today, as we gather at the foot of the cross we have to decide in one way or another what kind of institution we are as a church.*

And as we ponder what sort of an institution we want to belong to, there must be a hard look at the sort of people we need to be to make that happen. It may well feel uncomfortable – perhaps it even **should** feel uncomfortable.

But trust me – it will be nothing like as uncomfortable as hanging on a cross.

So – what was Jesus looking out on during those three hours on the first Good Friday? What was he seeing having been lifted up high?

Well, on a mundane level he was looking out on the filth of what was the city's rubbish dump as well as its place of execution. Having the two together made the disposal of bodies so much easier. The Gospel accounts tell us that Jesus was crucified between two criminals – but it's likely that he was looking out at far more than two who were sharing his fate. There may have been dozens who had been condemned to the cruel death – among the filth and the stench of a city's detritus.

In spite of the setting what he also looked out at was something of a carnival atmosphere.

We hear from the Evangelists of passers-by who were mocking and deriding him. Of the great and the good – the religious authorities presumably there to see for themselves the end of this man who had been a thorn in their flesh for years – taunting him.

He looked down on his mother – faithful to the end – and to the disciple described as the one whom he loved. And still there was enough love in him in spite of all that had happened to make sure that his mother was going to be properly cared for once he had gone.

And Jesus looked out with the eyes that had witnessed so many of his own interactions during the three years of his ministry.

What of the Samaritan woman at the well? What right did he have to share time with and speak with her?

Or the woman found in adultery? ‘Has no-one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you.’

Who was he in the habit of eating with? The tax-collectors, the poor, the women, the underclass and those who are just grouped together as sinners – all of the groups excluded by the rest of society. A society fractured. A society in which the divisions between the powerful and the weak, the haves and the have-nots were huge.

And in many ways that is why he is on the cross – he is mixing with all the people that society say he shouldn’t be mixing with.

One of the songs that I grew up with – and grew to love even before I understood the power of its lyrics – was Sydney Carter’s *When I needed a neighbour*.

It is a song which makes reference to the story of the sheep and the goats which is less about judgement and much more about the call to love the enemy – the call to see Christ in the least of our brothers and sisters:

The poor

The naked

The hungry

The prisoner

The sinners

Why on earth does somebody who claims to be a religious teacher – indeed, even a religious leader – not get upset with these sinners. But is it Jesus who looks to exclude these people or is it the Church. Why are we upset that he is not upset with sinners? The reality is that it is because we think that he should be and that is because we want him to be. How can these people be so obviously welcome when they are patently much less worthy than we are?

And the problem really starts when you consider that Jesus only really gets upset with those who think that they are not sinners!

So, as we try to look on through the eyes of Jesus, what does what he is seeing as his life ebbs away say to us? How does what we see call us to respond?

I think what we have to realise is that it is very easy for us to decide how we think Church should be done and for whom it should be done. It should be done the way that we want it to be done and it should be done for people like us ....

People who think like us.

People who look like us.

People who share our outlook on life.

And before long we have created a graven image – a Church which is made in our image. And that begins to exclude people. Think, years ago, of those who were divorced – who had made a mistake and because of that mistake were excluded from the sacramental life of the

Church and from any possibility of asking forgiveness for that mistake and re-marrying in Church.

Or of so many women who felt a called to the priesthood and yet were, for years, excluded. I trained with very good friends who were not ordained priest at the same time as me but who had to wait another few years.

We have just completed the debate on women bishops and now we begin a journey considering what our position should be on same-sex relationships. It will, no doubt, be a painful debate.

On a more mundane level I wonder how we might react if a young person wandered into one of our churches, so angry with life that they had multiple piercings, tattoos, multi-coloured and spiked hair – perhaps wearing leather and torn jeans. Not looking all that clean – not smelling all that fragrant other than, perhaps, a certain scent suggesting the use of something herbal. Would we offer a welcome or try to put some distance?

I am pretty sure that the Jesus who now hangs on the cross might want us to realise that the judgements which the Church has made in these and so many other areas have excluded people from the love of God. I remember my father losing faithful members of his congregation because he was unable to marry them back in the seventies. I know of women who walked away from faith because they felt that their treatment was so vile. And there are many in the LGBTI+ community who feel alienated, who feel unwelcome.

Jesus was clear that the Scribes, Pharisees and the Sadducees made the religion of the Jews an intolerable burden. They were far more concerned with rules and regulations than they were with helping people to come to know the love of God.

Perhaps part of what lies at the heart of the Church's current problems – declining numbers, less and less contact with young people, a sense that we are becoming less relevant in the modern world – lies with the fact that we leave so many people with the perception that they can only begin their journey to Christ on our terms.

When I talk with young adults the vast majority simply cannot understand why we should adopt some of the positions that we do.

And how should we respond – are we to follow Bishop Steven's call to be a Church which is more Christ-like – a Church which is Contemplative, Courageous and Compassionate?

We need to be a Church which can become conscious of what our call truly is. The danger is that we are no more that Church which is called to worship – we do a lot of worshipping. And yet, if you look through the Gospels, you simply will not find Jesus asking us to worship him. What you will find is a call to **follow him** with all that entails.

And what sort of Church will that lead us to be? Let's go back to the words of Bishop Steven as he concluded his presidential address:

*"They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying 'Peace, peace' where there is no peace."*

*We are to be people who take wounds seriously: in the world, in our nation, in our Church, in ourselves.*

*We are to be a Church of radical inclusion for all, cherishing the gifts of lay and ordained together.*

*We are to be a Church which is contemplative, compassionate, courageous.*

*We are to be a Church which takes herself seriously not for our own sake but for the sake of the world.*

## Second Address—Those in need

As we journey through these three hours, waiting with Jesus as his life ebbs away, we are trying to look at the world, back then and now, through Jesus eyes and to wonder what the consequences might be for us.

It's only three weeks since Comic Relief was broadcast. In so many ways it is a difficult watch. On the one hand much of the comedy isn't all that funny – even the much vaunted sequel to *Love Actually* seemed to me to miss the mark. But what can I expect from a ten minute slot during a telethon? Reeves and Mortimer managed to be dreadful again – I have never really quite understood their humour – and to be the cause of something like one-hundred and fifty complaints. Lenny Henry lost his temper with some drunk guests which was a little embarrassing and many would probably claim that it was the worst Comic Relief for many years and that resulted in one of the smallest 'on-the-night' totals for quite a while. Mind you, £73m will make a pretty considerable difference in a lot of lives.

But the hardest part of the watch comes with the films of those who the charity is trying to help. I think of the little girl, Becca, who cares for her mother with fibromyalgia. It's a horrible syndrome which is a long-term condition that causes pain all over the body.

As well as widespread pain, people with fibromyalgia may also have:

- Increased sensitivity to pain
- fatigue (extreme tiredness)
- muscle stiffness
- difficulty sleeping
- problems with mental processes (known as "fibro-fog") – such as problems with memory and concentration
- headaches
- irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) – a digestive condition that causes stomach pain and bloating

Becca's day starts at 6.30am as she takes her mother the first pills of the day and a cup of tea. There are days when her mother is so ill that she has to stand in and do everything. Becca is nine!

Her day ends at around 10.00pm with the last pills of the day. Becca said, 'Sometimes I can't hug my Mum because she is very hurting. I calm her down if she's upset.' And as she said those last words she broke down and cried.

We heard of two girls who had descended into the hell of self-harming through anxiety and depression. The triggers can be quite simple – maybe the loss of a loved one, or parents splitting up or friendship issues – problems of self-image. However it may feel to those mired in such misery, there is a way though it all and it was hugely encouraging to see that one of the girls featured, Kaz, had reached the point where she was able to help those who were now in the dark place that she had once inhabited.

Russell Howard, a comedian, went to the children's ward of Redemption Hospital in Liberia. He met Tabitha and her father, Alexander. Tabitha was severely malnourished. We discovered that is the fate of one in three children in Liberia. Tabitha was four months old and weighed just three kilograms – just a little over six and a half pounds in old money. We watched the doctors fighting to make her better and we also watched pain and fear etched into her father's face. All that was left for him to do was to comfort his little girl. It seemed a bit incongruous that he did it by singing Baa Baa Black Sheep – a frail black man singing an English nursery rhyme. As the piece came towards its end we returned to Russell speaking to camera. He had hoped as filming in Liberia had ended that Tabitha was going to pull

through. She didn't. And - as Mr Howard said - it is astonishing to think that even in 2017 children in our world are dying of hunger.

A couple of days before Red Nose Day we had been shown the exploits of the Red Nose African Convoy. David Baddiel and Hugh Dennis delivered a lorry load of mosquito nets to Nangongera in Eastern Uganda. Mosquitoes kill one thousand people in Africa every day and a child every two minutes. We met John-Charles who took David and Hugh to his garden to show how malaria had devastated his family. In the garden were five graves – one for his mother and four for his young children who had died. As he broke down he just looked an utterly desperate, lonely and forlorn figure. To have bought mosquito nets to save the four children's lives would have cost ten pounds.

As Russell Kane, another participant in the convoy, put it: *Next time I'm whinging because my skinny latte isn't warm enough I think a little voice will go, 'Shut up you snivelling idiot.'*

We saw midwives being supported, mentors trying to help those living with HIV and AIDS and saw that very often the support needed to make a massive difference in so many lives is actually very inexpensive. Who can imagine a family in this country, or anywhere in what we like to call the developed world, where four children would be lost for the want of ten pounds?

Ed Sheeran also went to Liberia to see the plight of children who are on their own and don't even have a bed to sleep in. He met J. D. Who had been on the streets for six months. His mother and grandfather had been killed by the Ebola virus and his father had run away from him. He wanted to go to school. His ambition was to be the President so that he could feed the community by giving people food to feed their children. By giving these children an education we give them hope.

The pop star was so moved by what he saw that he made provision for the five little boys he had met finding accommodation and somebody to look after them – somebody to make sure that they get an education. Somebody to make sure that they can reach towards hope – towards being the best that they can be without the shackles of poverty. But, as Ed Sheeran said, he had only helped five out of the hundreds and hundreds of children who shared the fate of J. D.

The reality is that in 2017 people are dying because they are poor. The reality is that even small children are having to fend for themselves, sleeping rough and doing whatever they can to scratch a living. Lives that will remain hopeless until those with the means and the power to do something about it break the cycle of poverty.

And that is what Jesus looks out on as he dies. A world in which there is more food than we need and yet children die of malnutrition; a world in which there is huge wealth – where people spend millions on huge yachts (though they aren't really yachts – they are massive motor cruisers). A world of multiple homes, private jets and wealth beyond even our ability to imagine. And yet a father has had to bury four of his children because he didn't have ten pounds to buy mosquito nets.

I remember a day very shortly after I had been ordained deacon. Equipping my new home had been quite expensive on a curate's stipend. I went along to a local DIY store to get something – I don't remember what – only for my card to be declined. It felt like the end of the world – but it was just before pay day. I was still able to get about on my bicycle and there was food in the fridge. I didn't go hungry, I didn't have to sleep rough and I didn't catch any terrible disease because of the conditions I was living in. I was a bit embarrassed but in every other way, absolutely fine!

The trouble is that in allowing the gap between the wealthy and the poor to grow and grow we are at least colluding with the notion that some people have more value than others. You will often hear those who speak against a hereditary monarchy or peerage asking why such people should be born into such privilege because of an accident of birth. Maybe the question that Jesus asks - on this day of all days as he stands accused of not having enough worth to

be allowed to live – ‘why are there so many who are born into **poverty** and **destitution** through a simple accident of birth. Perhaps he would want us to worry less about the wealthy and the privileged and much more about improving the lot of those at the other end of the scale.

As we watch our Lord and Saviour suffering on the cross we are confronted with the suffering of millions of people across the world who suffer in ways that we cannot imagine. I wonder what Jesus thinks as he looks over such an unequal world?

I'm not sure that he would necessarily blame the rich for being rich. Often the super-rich have contributed something to society in terms of making life better. And even us – who by most judgements are comfortably well-off compared with so many in the world - have often worked hard to get where we are.

There's a temptation to look towards what Jesus said when Mary, sister of Lazarus, anointed his feet with costly perfume:

*You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.* (John 12: 8)

And to use that saying to justify the view that Jesus was suggesting that there is little or nothing. But I saw a convincing argument the other day which suggests that the exact opposite might be true. If I were to say to you, ‘Sticks and stones’, I'm pretty sure that the majority of us know how the phrase ends. We can use ‘sticks and stones’ as a short-hand for ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

With that in mind listen to words of the Torah that would have been well known to those listening to Jesus:

*If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your needy neighbour. <sup>8</sup>You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. <sup>9</sup>Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near’, and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. <sup>10</sup>Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. <sup>11</sup>Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth – for which we can read ‘the poor are always with you’ - , I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land. (Deuteronomy 15: 7-11)*

Maybe it is that, far from being able to console ourselves with the thought that the problem of poverty is so huge that there is nothing we can do about it, the reminder that the poor will be with us always was actually a rallying call to be generous. How might that speak to the way that we exercise our own faith and shape the institution of the Church?

### Third Address—Hatred

We have spent the first hour together trying to look through Jesus eyes at the events which surround him – both on that first Good Friday but also at the things he sees today. And, as we look on with his eyes we have to ask how what we see challenges us and shapes us – as well as how it challenges and shapes the institution of the Church.

Over the past twenty years we have become more and more aware of people who appear to hate us and are prepared to inflict all sorts of violence and pain to make their point. We only have to say the words 9/11 or 7/7 for the horror of the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, the Pentagon or the London transport network to come flooding back. We remember attacks in Madrid, in Paris, Germany and Belgium.

But please don't think that the violence is limited to western countries. Already this year nearly 350 people have been killed in terrorist incidents and more than 700 have been injured. We know about the attack in Westminster – the others this year have taken place in Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, India and Bangladesh. So, without wanting to be glib, it isn't that what we have come to know as Islamist Militants have only got it in for us and for our way of life. They are even prepared to kill and main members of their own faith who don't practice in exactly the same way as they do – people who perhaps hold a different view of the Koran, hold a different view of how things should be done. They are very set in their ways.

And with that thought, as I was sitting writing this address, I became very struck that there are those, even within the Church of England, who are very set in their ways. And before anybody rushes out to the Bucks Herald to tell them that I have made a comparison between militant Islaam and parts of the Church of England – I have not. I am just struck by how damaging it can be to be inflexible.

Let's look back for a few minutes to see if we can work out why the relationship between the Middle East is so difficult.

An American blogger called Amir Roohi suggests that there might be seven reasons:

1. At the end of the First World War and with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the West carved up the Middle East into various mandates under the auspices of the newly formed League of Nations. Although the Arabs had been promised that they would have a large state for fighting the Ottomans, the promise was not delivered. Brand new countries, Jordan and Iraq, were created and borders were drawn with little or no regard to tribal or religious allegiances. You only have to look at a map of the area and see so many straight lines to know that it was an arbitrary process. There are, by the way, striking similarities with North Africa. The British installed one King in Jordan and another in Iraq – neither of whom had ever been to their new domains. And the question of Palestine was left unresolved. Whatever promises had been made it became clear that what the new powers principally cared about was the protection of economic and strategic interests.
2. The Western powers have continued to exercise their power throughout the region. Leaders have been both ousted and supported. And even when the human rights record of these leaders has been awful, a blind eye has been turned and aid and weaponry sent in. And while we certainly cannot be blamed for the worst excesses of some of these terrible men our lack of challenge has emboldened them – while we can't be blamed in full for the actions of these tyrants, the West is not completely innocent.
3. The third reason cited by Amir Roohi is Israel. Now his name gives away his heritage but he makes it absolutely clear that in his view the state of Israel has a continuing right to exist and that the holocaust did happen. In the aftermath of the Second World War the West were convinced that the Jews deserved their own country and

Palestine was seen as the logical place. Of course that decision took no account of the views or needs of the millions of non-Jews who were living there and who had had nothing to do with the genocide. And so it was that the U.S., Great Britain and the Soviet Union were deciding the fate of Arab Christians, Arab Muslims, Druze and Jews in the halls of the United Nations in New York. Many of the Jews who moved to Israel were secular – European in demeanour and outlook. Over the years the West has consistently turned a blind eye to Israeli actions in Gaza and the West Bank. To the Arab world the dealings of the West must feel terribly one sided.

4. Without me going into detail here, Roohi cites outright colonialism as his fourth reason. The colonial rule of the French, or the British or the Italians and the subsequent struggles for self-determination, are still vividly remembered in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt.
5. Fifthly, we continue to support horrible regimes while turning a blind eye to human rights records.
6. Then there are the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Untold misery with no discernable positive outcome.
7. And finally there is a sense that we only get involved when we want to. Syria has made it back into the news recently. Roohi says:  
*The civil war in Syria has been going on for years. Millions had already been displaced. Horrendous human rights abuses occur daily. The West would condemn the situation, but do nothing about it. Until the attacks in Paris, air strikes against ISIS were not done in earnest. The news is filled with the atrocities committed by ISIS and Syrian government troops against the local population. Again, none of this is new. The Muslim populations of these areas might be forgiven for thinking we only care because the terror finally reached our doorstep. Nor is Syria the lone example. The Taliban (and before them our allies: the Northern Alliance) publicly executed dissidents, religious minorities, and women for a full decade before 9/11. Women were denied an education and forced under the burqa long before 9/11. Again, we didn't seem to care until after we experienced the wrath of those being harboured in Afghanistan.*

And he goes on to finish the piece saying:

*My name and appearance makes it impossible to hide my Middle Eastern roots. There is no question that I am beyond grateful to have been born and raised in this country. I can speak my mind with no fear for my personal safety. We can elect who we want without fearing the British, Russians, or Chinese will invade us to make sure their preferred candidate is put in the White House. No one else decided what our boundary lines would be. We don't take directives from other countries on how we should govern ourselves. The people of the Middle East, partly because of us, have rarely had these luxuries.*

*Nothing excuses the thousands of innocent lives lost in New York, Madrid, Paris, London, Washington, Mumbai, or Bali. But, unfortunately, we aren't as innocent as we would like to think.*

And if we aren't as innocent as we might like to think do we need to look at the way we react to these events through Jesus' eyes.

Perhaps we need to try to imagine how we might have reacted if a foreign power claimed power over the UK and redrew the borders between the various components of the Union before deciding who was going to be monarch choosing somebody from, say, the Turks and Caicos Islands. We don't have to wonder too hard in a sense because we saw the resolve of the nation particularly during the Second World War. The nation united around a figurehead

who, as it turned out, might not have been all that popular. Don't forget that Churchill lost the 1945 General Election to Clement Attlee.

Let's be absolutely clear that every terrorist attack is an utter outrage and that there is no excuse for those who carry them out. We have a right to condemn the actions and to feel both fear and anger. We used to hear more than we do now about a 'war on terror' and the 'axis of evil'. We heard talk of wiping these people from the face of the earth – of defeating them. And perhaps all they heard was that the West still want to run their countries, still want to impose our values and ways of doing things.

If we all accept that things can't go on as they are, then different messages need to start coming out. Perhaps we need to be asking those who clearly feel such resentment to help us to understand why they feel as they do and then to try to work out what we can do to change those feelings. It was good to see leaders of different religions coming together after the Westminster attack. Of course there were no extremists there – but it is the sort of picture that needs to be seen more and more often – leaders of different faiths coming together to try to speak with one voice about the need for peace.

That's the part that the Church can play – alongside Muslims and Jews as well as those of other faiths. But Jews, Christians and Muslims share a common heritage and even a shared title. We are the people of the book – we share much of what we regard as Scripture.

And while there are passages which are difficult – for example the command in Deuteronomy 17 to exact the death sentence against those who commit abomination we sure need to read the Scriptures through the eyes of the one who spoke from the cross:

*Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'* (Luke 23: 34)

I wonder if we are ready to speak those words to those who commit terrorist atrocities.  
*'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'*

The history of the Middle East and parts of North Africa is such that it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that a rage burns within some of those who live there and associate themselves with those who live there. It's not just the people of the region who have shaped that history and it is a history which has, in part at least, destroyed the moral compass of so many.

The reality as I see it is that our call is not to be part of the clamour to defeat this evil which pervades so much of the world. Our call is to love this evil out of existence – it's the better way – and I believe it is Jesus' way.

## Fourth address—Greed

There's not much that gets my goat. I was reminded of one of them yesterday—it's supermarkets during the school holidays. If people drove cars like they drive supermarket trollies then there would be carnage on the road. Stopping suddenly and for no apparent reason. Veering across your path at the very last moment. Parking their trollies in front of the one item that you need from that aisle and taking ages to choose what they want. Add to that the groups who think the best place to stand and have a chat is right in the middle of an aisle leaving no way through for the other shoppers. And then the school holidays add their chaos—uncontrolled children all over the place with parents who seem to have no interest in the effect they might be having on other shoppers.

Another is, I suppose, shared by those who are not out all day at work and who become more aware of a certain type of intrusion into the home. You know the sort of thing, the phone rings and a voice says, 'Hello, can I speak with ..... whoever. This is Andrew calling from BT or Microsoft or a bank or any one of a number of other companies – you may have been sold PPI or had an accident recently. If they're calling from BT it's apparently to help me with a broadband fault or because they have detected unusual activity and if they are calling from Microsoft then I gather that I have a problem with my windows computer.

Let's run with the Microsoft call for a moment. You have all sorts of choices to make. Do you just hang up? Do you just hang up having given the caller the benefit of your views on the legitimacy of the call? Do you tell the caller to get a proper job or launch into a tirade about their immorality? Or perhaps you have a few minutes to spare and think you might be doing others a favour by keeping them on the line. After all, if they are talking with you they can't be talking with anybody else.

I have to say that for the Microsoft call you can have quite a bit of fun asking which of your Windows computers is reporting the problem – or saying that you don't have a Windows computer – you have a Dell, or an Acer or Lenovo or Hewlett-Packard or any one of the many brands available. It then becomes an exercise in keeping the caller on the line rather than getting them off the line. It all depends how much time and energy you have.

Of course these calls are scams and have only one intention. It's nothing to do with helping the person who has been called it's all about getting information or money out of them. And if it is information they ask for then the odds are that will be used to take money.

I want to suggest that in this scenario there are two sets of victims. The first group is obviously those who have been called and, for whatever reason, are not savvy enough on that day to realise what is happening. But think for a moment of those who are placing the calls. Let's assume for a moment that they are unaware of the harm that they might be doing. I gather that research suggests that the success rate of these calls is between one and three percent. In other words, the people involved in this work have a failure rate of between ninety-seven and ninety-nine percent. I think it likely that much of that failure is accompanied by a good deal of invective. It must be a thoroughly demoralising existence. And who are doing these jobs? Well those calling from the Indian sub-continent are likely to be highly educated. And yet all that is available to them is a dead-loss job which means that they must spend much of their day being shouted at.

That is a problem of the economy in that part of the world and I would want to suggest that the callers are every bit as much victims as are those who are called. The finger of blame has to be pointed at those who exploit this situation. Those who are behind the scenes and yet garnering huge wealth. Those who think only of themselves and what they want with absolutely no thought for the impact they are having on the lives of so many others.

When I worked in my last parish, just outside Sunderland, we had to deal with a number of problems. Unemployment was high and there was little prospect of work for many of the older men who knew nothing but mining as a way of earning a living. It was a village with hopelessness writ large where ever you looked.

And when life feels hopeless there are a number of different options open to people. For those who are strong enough there is the option of trying to find a purpose and a direction in life. But that is hard – anybody who has ever suffered with depression will know just how hard it is to move from hopelessness to hope. Others simply sought ways to make their lives feel a little better – or to shut out the pain of what they were feeling. The relatively small community had a high street which was almost exactly a mile long – and in that mile there were sixteen licensed premises. In the seven years I was there not a single one of those establishments went out of business. You could look through the windows of any one of them at pretty much any time of the day and see working age men and women sitting around tables drinking.

For some the numbing effect of alcohol wasn't enough. We faced a pretty severe drug problem in the village. I think of a funeral visit I had to make to a single mother who had lost her only child when he was knocked down at the age of nine. Her drug use made it almost impossible to get through to her. And on the day of the funeral itself she was so high that she actually laughed through parts of the service.

Or I think of the time when I was taking a boiler engineer to service the boiler in church. It was in a room down some steps at the east end. We got to the top of the steps and there, at the bottom, was a young man just about to inject himself with heroin. Fortunately he stayed calm about being asked to leave – but as I looked back on the incident later in the day I realised that things could have gone very differently.

Of course these drugs wouldn't be available if there weren't people who are willing to produce them – whether in Columbia or in Afghanistan or wherever. But again I wonder whether there might not be two sets of victim here. The addicts obviously – but also those who grow the opium poppy because they can't make a living farming normal crops. And once again there are those who are entirely happy to exploit the situation for their own gain.

And there's a final group of people we can think about in this half hour who have been perfectly happy to others to gratify their own needs. They appear to inhabit every level of society – celebrities, peers, bishops, carers, Scout and Guide leaders – people known and unknown. They are, of course, those who abuse the young and the vulnerable for their own sexual gratification or their own sadistic instincts. I know that it still goes on today – people are still being caught. But I sincerely hope that the mindset of society is changing.

I think of some of my own teachers. A maths teacher, a big man, who was a bully to the point that, when I returned to school after a three week absence having badly injured my back playing rugby, came over to me and leant on my shoulders applying as much pressure as he could while asking how I was. Or of the physics teacher who was perfectly happy to beat any boy who simply didn't understand. Or of an R.E. and history teacher, a priest who we called 'Tapper' who imposed a hierarchy of punishment ranging from being put across his knee to be spanked – his word, not mine – to the theatre of a slippering which involved him running the width of the room, gown billowing, before striking his blow.

I think of a colleague – Priest in Charge of a neighbouring parish in Sunderland. We were interviewing for new members of staff for the local secondary school. He appeared distracted and his phone was constantly bleeping as messages came in. I got a phone call early the next morning from the Diocesan Director of Education to tell me, as Chair of Governors, that my colleague had been arrested overnight for having sex with a girl on her thirteenth birthday. He was married with three children – the youngest was three months old.

I think of a bishop, somebody who had sat at my parent's dining table on a number of occasions who has been convicted of historic sexual abuse.

And what of those who we know from TV. I never liked Jimmy Saville. I remember a girl in my form when I was teaching who went to be on 'Jim'll Fix It' – she wanted to be a weather presenter. I thought she would come back to school talking about nothing but her experience. She was strangely quiet. Or Stuart Hall – king of 'It's a Knockout' (Jeux sans frontières), foot-

ball commentator extraordinaire and presenter of the North West BBC magazine programme. Or Rolf 'd'you know what it is yet?' Harris? Celebrities who have all abused their positions to inflict suffering on so many vulnerable people.

Jesus looks on a whole host of those whose lives have been ruined by the actions of those who have no interest in anything but gratifying their own desires – whatever they might be – without any thought or care for the impact that might be had on others.

As we look through Jesus' eyes at these people – victims and perpetrators – what might we be being prompted to think, say and do? Let's turn first to the Letter of James which says, chapter 3 verse 16

*For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

Put that alongside Mark 12:31:

*The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.*

And finally, Mark 8: 34

*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

It could not be clearer – selfishness and greed have no place in our world and are the cause of so many of the troubles we witness day by day as we watch the news, read our papers or surf the net seeing what is going on. At a mundane level, the nuisance of receiving unsolicited and unwanted calls or the pain and embarrassment of being duped. As the troubles escalate we see addiction and abuse, on through poverty and need to commit violence and, finally, warfare.

We know that Jesus wept when he heard the news that his friend Lazarus had died. He must surely weep as he looks out at so many lives broken by the greed and selfishness of others. And those tears must elicit a response from us to consider what our call is. A Facebook contributor put it this way the other day:

*I believe in a church that follows Jesus Christ, who reaches out to all and invites all to follow Him. We are all invited to become equal at the foot of the cross, and by repentance from our sins and faith in Jesus' name, to be recreated and restored spiritually and start a daily journey, in relationship with Father God, in our Lord Jesus, by Holy Spirit.*

## Fifth Address—Division

I'm sure that you will be familiar with the phrase, 'What goes around comes around.'

It has a couple of meanings. First that the status eventually returns to its original value after completing some sort of cycle and second that a person's actions, whether good or bad, will often have consequences for that person.

What goes around comes around.

I think that there is a certain sense of the completion of a cycle in this country at the moment. The Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, took the UK into the EEC in January 1973 after President de Gaulle of France had blocked UK membership twice in the 1960s. This brought EEC membership to nine. In a referendum in 1975 the UK electorate voted to stay in the EEC under renegotiated terms of entry. 67.2% voted yes, 38.2% voted no.

It's fair to say that the UK's relationship with the rest of the EEC or the EU as it became has not been easy – at different times both for Tory and Labour parties. In the end David Cameron honoured an election commitment to offer an 'in / out' referendum on membership of the EU and on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2016 the answer was given. 51.89% voted to leave with 48.11% voting to remain. And now that the nation has given a 'clear answer' we stand near the beginning of the process of Brexit with all the uncertainty that will bring.

In so many ways the result arises from a whole series of unexpected events – perhaps chief among them that the offer of a referendum was relatively easy to make. Nobody, possibly even David Cameron himself, expected the Conservatives to win an outright majority. Maybe his intention was that the referendum would be a price worth paying to form a new coalition. The second reality is that very few people, including Nigel Farage, expected that the vote would be to leave. That's why the last few months have seemed so chaotic – there were no contingency plans for this eventuality.

You will be relieved to hear that I am not about to launch into some sort of political polemic. I want to treat this reality, alongside the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, in the same way that I have dealt with other issues this afternoon. To try to look at what is going on through the eyes of Jesus as he hangs, dying, on the cross. And it's not a case of looking at the results, but of looking at why people voted as they did. And it's when we do that we see why there is a relevance today.

I know that those who were on the side of leave say that the country clearly expressed its view on March 23<sup>rd</sup> and I understand their need to say that. The reality is somewhat different. The result was actually very close – roughly speaking, one third in, one third out and one third who, no doubt for a whole host of reasons, did not vote. In that scenario, those who analyse these sorts of thing have looked at the coalition of those who voted leave. The Huffington Post reports that a group of economically disadvantaged, anti-immigration voters, people who don't normally vote but who did so last June, helped to secure the vote to leave.

Let's focus, just for a moment, on the word 'disadvantaged'. Clearly Mrs May felt that disadvantage was an important cause of the result. Remember what she said on the steps of Number Ten as she began her journey as Prime Minister.

*If you're from an ordinary working class family, life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise," said May. "We will make Britain a country that works not for a privileged few, but for every one of us.*

And in this we perhaps see a recognition of a disconnect between the ruling classes, the Westminster elite, and those for whom life is much more of a struggle. Perhaps few, if any of us here, can truly imagine what it might be like to be living on a zero-hours contract, not knowing how much money might be coming in each week. We probably don't know what it is like to have to make a choice between heating and eating. We probably don't know the sense of feeling trapped, with no possibility of escape, in a world of poverty.

But for many that is the reality of life. Ryhope, near Sunderland, my last parish taught me that. Many simply can't see the route to the world of work and wealth that is so often described by our politicians. They see those politicians as being remote and aloof – who actually make their lives more difficult rather than lightening the load. I wonder if this reminds you of any other group? Listen to some words from St Matthew's Gospel, some verses from chapter 23.

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

*'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.'*

Perhaps, if we look at the disadvantaged and their reasons for voting as they did through Jesus eyes, we might begin to understand. I suggest that he would understand, and perhaps even applaud, those who feel voiceless and powerless for taking the opportunity to make their voice heard and to exercise what little power they feel they might have to give the ruling elite a little bit of a bloody nose.

The other factor which played out noisily in the Brexit debate was the issue of immigration. And as that debate was played out the language became more and more immoderate. 'The country is swamped' many said. 'Too many people are coming and taking our jobs.' 'Our schools and hospitals already can't cope.' There was a particular UKIP poster showing a queue of refugees trying to reach Europe with the banner 'Breaking Point'. It was a low point in a debate of poor quality which, it seems to me, had more to do with whipping up division.

I wonder what we see if we look at the issue of migration and immigration through Jesus' eyes. The principal reason why I found that UKIP poster abhorrent was that the people it showed were probably not migrants out of choice. They were refugees fleeing conflict in, among other places, Syria. They were fleeing an intolerable situation trying to find something better. These people are not 'no-hope chancers' – many are professionals - doctors, nurses, lawyers, business people – the majority are hard-working just looking to find a life that allows them to be the best that they can be without having to fear daily for their own lives and those of their families. These are people displaced, at least in part as we heard in the first hour, as a consequence of the West's history of interfering in the Middle East and North Africa. They need our welcome – not our derision. They need our doors to be open to them – not for us to turn our backs on them. They need us to be neighbours to them – not to use them as pawns in a political debate which, actually, has nothing to do with them. They need us to love them – not to revile or persecute them. The point I make is not a political one – if we had been driven from our homes by years of fighting would we not look towards a part of the world where we might be able to make a better life for ourselves?

I do understand the difference between refugees and economic migrants. There is the notion that EU migrants are somehow taking our birthright from us. They are after our jobs – or they are coming for benefits. Which is it? Because it can't be both! And I wonder how many native Brits are out of work because of migrants whether from the EU or further afield. It came

out at the beginning of this week that 900 care workers leave their jobs every day leading to growing staff shortages meaning that vulnerable people are receiving poorer levels of care. The percentage of staff leaving a role in that sector every year is steadily rising and is approaching 30%. It's not surprising that people leave the profession when they can earn more for stacking shelves in a supermarket.

That's not a problem of migration – indeed without migrants coming in to work in the sector it would probably already have collapsed.

There are two further suggestions that need to be debunked. The benefit system is such that economic migrants have no entitlement for quite some time. The reality is that, even when they are entitled to claim benefits, a tiny number actually do. And, finally, you might have noticed that for more than a year now, every time the unemployment figures are announced a commentator will tell us that we have, to all intents and purposes, full employment. They will say that those who are out of work are in that position because they choose to be, not because there are no jobs available.

One further brief thought before bringing this address to a close. I don't think many thought that we would vote to leave Europe and I don't think many thought that Donald Trump would be elected as President of the USA. Perhaps that led some to be apathetic about the outcome – and maybe that, in part, played a hand in what the actual outcome was.

And so I wonder what Jesus might have to say as he looks out at the political landscape on either side of the Atlantic. A landscape full of ego and people telling us which way we should be going – claiming that their way is the right way. I think that he might want to remind us of the need to search for truth and that he might do so by repeating words which he spoke to Thomas:

*Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14: 6)*

## Sixth address—The Shepherd

It's nearly ten years since the death of Phil Drabble. He was a passionate naturalist who campaigned for the good of the countryside for decades. But that isn't what he was best known for. He came to prominence when he hosted *One Man and His Dog*. Who would have thought that sheep dog trialling, hosted by an old man in his flat cap, would regularly attract a television audience of around six million people.

Those who farm sheep, particularly in difficult country, need the help of one or more dogs to move the sheep around. Out of that need arose a sport which is first recorded as having taken place in Wanaka, New Zealand in 1867. The first trial in the UK is recorded by Janet Larson writing in 'The Versatile Border Collie'. She wrote:

*The first sheepdog trial was held in Bala, Wales, on October 9, 1873. It was organized by Richard John Lloyd Price, squire of Rhiwlas Estate and friend of Sewallis Shirley, MP, founder of the Kennel Club that same year. Ten dogs competed and over 300 spectators attended. The winner was Mr. James Thompson with Tweed, a compact, black and tan Scottish bred dog with a foxy face.*

Trialling is simply a formalised version of controlling and moving a flock of sheep through a variety of exercises: you might hear words like 'outrun', or 'lift' or 'fetch', or drive. And you'll hear the shepherd controlling the dog or dogs either with a series of whistles or a series of commands.

When it goes well, the dog, on command, runs from the handler in a wide arc to collect the sheep who are standing somewhere in the distance. They become aware of the dog and in their natural desire to get away from the dog they start to move away from him. It's then up to the shepherd to move the dog about so that the sheep follow the correct course through a series of gates. Quite often the trial ends, once the sheep are near to the handler, with what's called the 'shed' – where one or more sheep are separated from the rest of the flock in a controlled manner before the sheep are finally penned. Each element of the trial is judged and the winner is the person with highest score.

When it goes well, all we can do is marvel at the skill of dog and handler. The dog will gently move the sheep forward from behind moving to left and to right to keep them on the right track and applying just enough pressure to keep them moving at a steady pace – neither too fast nor too slow and certainly not stopping. There must be a tremendous sense of satisfaction closing the gate of the pen at the end of a good run.

However, like so many things in life, it doesn't always go well. To a certain extent the handler and the dog require the cooperation of the sheep. They are a flock animal – when they are moving, certainly with what they perceive as a predator in the vicinity, they like to move as one. That helps the shepherd when all is going well – the sheep want to stay together. However, there is a down side. There are times when it is clear that the collective will of the sheep is stronger than the will of the shepherd and the dog. And a trial that starts to go wrong can, at times, quickly descend to the level of farce with sheep all over the place and a shepherd at his post frantically whistling or calling to try to bring some order to the chaos.

As we come towards the end of our time together – time that we have spent with Jesus as he hangs dying on the cross – trying to look at the issues we have to deal with through our Lord's eyes – it seems to me that there are lessons which we might want to learn from the sport of sheepdog trialling.

Let's remember the words which we heard at the end of the last address. *'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (John 14: 6)

The Good Shepherd, our Saviour is the one who knows the way. If the sheep in a trial weren't being guided in the right way they would simply wander all over the place. In many ways we are much the same. Left to our own devices we often seem to lose our way.

Of course, the reality is that we aren't ever left to our own devices – it's just that, at times, the clamour of what we want to do drowns out the guidance that we are receiving from the good shepherd. We lose our way not because there is no direction being given – it's just that we have stopped listening. We have to ask ourselves whether we believe that God has spoken and that his Word is contained within Scripture, or whether we believe that God is still speaking to the situations we find ourselves in today.

I just have to gently suggest that if we are not alive to the fact that God is speaking to us today then we are part of a faith which is dead or dying. Those who wrote the Scriptures were people of their time speaking to people with the same experiences and understandings. They could not possibly have envisaged what it might be like to live today and what our understanding of the world and creation might be. I think it is probably harder to believe today than it was before we had the understanding of the universe we now have.

And it is in that thought that we begin to see part of the problem in knowing what the right way is. Our understandings change – our views change. Does that mean that we are turning away from God?

If you go back to Deuteronomy 23: 11 you will read that we are not to wear clothes of wool and linen woven together. Leviticus 11: 4,7 tells us:

*But among those that chew the cud or have divided hooves, you shall not eat the following: the camel, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you. The pig, for even though it has divided hoofs and is cloven-footed, it does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you.*

We are commanded under the old covenant to stone those caught in adultery, not to mix meat and dairy and so on and so on.

Or if we want a New Testament example how about turning to St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11: 5-6):

*Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil.*

The simple point that I am trying to make is that we are already selective, as we search for God's way, about which parts of Scripture we hold to be essential and those we do not and in doing that we have crossed a line. The only question left is to ask what sort of test we might apply to making decisions about what we believe to be right and what we must still hold to be wrong – as we make decisions about which way the shepherd is directing us. For bear in mind that you will never see a sheepdog leading sheep. The shepherd and the dog guide but the sheep still have the freedom to head off in whatever direction they might choose.

I think we need look no further than St Matthew's Gospel (22: 34-40) for the answer:

*When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, '“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'*

In a nutshell, there is a simple test that we must apply to any decision that we make about any issue – does it pass the test of love. The criticism of the Scribes and the Pharisees was that they simply applied the law in a way that was burdensome – in a way that gave no thought to the needs or well-being of those on whom they applied the law.

What Jesus says is that everything that has gone before – all of the law and all of the prophets – reaches its culmination in love. Love for God and love for our neighbour.

And if we want to see that love modelled then we see it now, right in front of us on the cross. A love poured out in sweat, blood, tears and agony. A love which bore no thought for self but which gave itself for the sake of all people.

The love which looks down on us now perhaps questioning what sort of people we choose to be.

I wonder, as we stand at the foot of the cross, whether we dare look into the eyes that look out on so much suffering. What would we see? I suggest that it might be a mixture of love, of pain and of challenge.

We began nearly three hours ago reflecting on a challenge to consider what sort of institution we want to belong to. Is it made in our image or is it to be in God's image? And if it is to be in God's image what does that mean?

If we are to be a loving Church then we will have to realise that our call is to be radical. There is no place for apathy in a loving Church. We are to be a neighbour to all in need. We are to speak up for those who feel marginalised. We are to challenge those in authority when they lose sight of the needs of those who they are called to serve. We are to work against persecution, speak out against injustice and to provide for those who have so much less than us.

Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. He must weep as he looks down on a world broken and divided. What are we doing to dry those tears?