

Theological Society Lecture: 14th April 2005

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1. They say you should never explain, never apologise. I'm going to explain and apologise twice! Here is the first one: let me apologise that I am not Professor Frances Young. She contacted us at the weekend to say that her mother was gravely ill so she felt she couldn't come, and then again to say that her mother had died. That's why you've got me.
2. When I was at theological college Professor Basil Mitchell came and gave a lecture on theological ping pong. First, those who write theology are very often writing in reaction to other theologians with whose theology they disagree and of course those who are written against then need to respond and so the ball bounces backwards and forwards. But second, Basil Mitchell was also suggesting that there is a tendency for writers to caricature their opponents or the opposing position. In what I am going to say next I accept that I am probably caricaturing a particular set of positions but I think there are enough grains of truth in it to allow me to proceed.
3. My assertion is that a lot of theology aims to be ideologically neutral, academically respectable, impersonal and apolitical. Some of the reasons for this are easy to understand. Theologians who work in universities have to stand alongside other departments. They are subject to the same pressures to publish, pressures of inspection, of numbers of students and finances and the wish to stand alongside those other disciplines and departments in the prestige and rigour of their subject. And so theologians adopt the same supposedly value free style.
4. At the other side of the ping pong table are those who understand theology as an autobiographical exercise. A writer's presuppositions and commitments play an important part in the conversations he or she has with God, the Bible, the Christian community and the wider world. It's my view that it's not possible to eliminate such background and experience and pre-understanding. Nor is it desirable if we believe that such things are at least one of the ways in which God communicates to us and are therefore the seed bed for new ideas. To be sure, such things can potentially be obstructive rather than constructive but there they are, there we are.
5. As an aside, let me offer the reflection that those sermons which are most powerful are those in which the preacher reveals something of him or herself. Of course many of us are naturally

reluctant to do such a thing and I know for myself that I have to wrestle most with myself in those sermons where I give something of myself away. In order to do this, you have to have enough behind, enough depth, so that you haven't put everything in the shop window. What you reveal, the commitments you show, should not be self indulgent – which is the danger at the other extreme.

6. A second glancing reflection on the nature of theology as an autobiographical exercise comes from post-modernism. Post-modernism can be defined as a suspicion of or even hostility to grand narratives. Grand narratives are attempts to describe an over-arching authoritative world view. Post modern critiques suggest that you cannot find a place to stand outside yourself, your situation, your language or history; everything is relative. People attempt to “stand outside” because they wish to claim power and assert themselves but such attempts can always be dismantled, deconstructed.
7. So instead of attempting to write theology which is applicable at all times and in all places there have been some new kinds of theology written which could be classified as contextual theologies – that is to say that they are theologies written in and for a particular context. There have been lots of consciously contextual theologies but for this paper I wish to focus on some of the most recent, many of which are grouped together under a general title of liberation theologies. The two earliest liberation theologies were Liberation Theology itself which arose in South America and Black Theology in North America. Both of these date from the mid 1960s. In the Far East there are examples such as Water Buffalo theology, Min Yung theology and in India Dalit theology. There has also been a more global Feminist theology and in Europe theology we could put together under the umbrella of Peace theology. I am going to give some short examples of Black theology and Dalit theology making the perhaps unjustified assumption that you may not have heard or read any of these. They are actually quite hard to get hold of in the UK.
8. First, James Cone, a black American, experiencing racism, writing for his own community in the United States:

Quotations from James Cone

"This present work seeks to be revolutionary in the sense that it attempts to bring to theology a special attitude permeated with black consciousness. This work further seeks to be

revolutionary in that "The fact that I am Black is my ultimate reality." My identity with *blackness*, and what it means for millions living in a white world, controls the investigation."¹

"The new black man refuses to assume the It-role which whites expect, but addresses them as an equal. This is when the conflict arises. Therefore the new black man refuses to speak of love without justice and power. Love without the power to guarantee justice in human relations is meaningless..."²

"The debate is over. There will be no more meetings between liberal religious whites and middle class Negroes to discuss the status of race relations in their communities. Black Theology believes that the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through *action*. Therefore, its task is to carve out a revolutionary theology based on relevant involvement in the world of racism. 'Revolution aims at the substitution of a new system for one adjudged to be corrupt, rather than corrective adjustments within the existing system..... The power of revolution is coercive.'"³

"Among other things, this [II Corinthians 5.19] means that the wall of hostility is broken down between blacks and whites, making colour irrelevant to man's essential nature. But in a white racist society, Black Theology believes that the biblical doctrine of reconciliation can be made a reality only when white people are prepared to address black men as *black* men and not as some grease-painted form of white humanity."⁴

Black Theology's answer to the question of hermeneutics can be stated briefly: *The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognise that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The test of the validity of this starting point, although dialectically related to black cultural experience, is not found in the particularity of the oppressed culture alone. It is found in the One who freely granted us freedom when we were doomed to slavery. Divine revelation alone is the test of the validity of this starting point. And if it can be shown that God as witnessed in the Scriptures is not the Liberator of the oppressed, then Black Theology would have either to drop the "Christian" designation or to choose another starting point.*⁵

"..... one's Christian identity is defined more by one's commitment to the liberation of the poor than by repeating a confession of faith in Jesus written by Europeans."⁶

"Only black women can do black feminist theology: their experience is truly theirs. Therefore, even if white feminists were not so racist and black males were not so sexist, there would still be a need for black feminist theology. The need arises from the uniqueness of black women's experience. If theology arises out of the attempt to reconcile faith with life, and if black women

¹ Cone: *Black Theology and Black Power* (Seabury Press 1969) p 32, quoting Maulana Ron Marenga

² Cone: *Black Theology and Black Power* (Seabury Press 1969) p 53

³ Cone: *Black Theology and Black Power* (Seabury 1969) pp 135 f

⁴ Cone: *Black Theology and Black Power* (Seabury Press 1969) p 147

⁵ Cone: *God of the Oppressed* (Seabury Press 1975) pp 81, 82 (Cone's italics)

⁶ Cone: *For My People* (Orbis 1984) p 86. The sense of Cone's argument here is that he sees Christian identity as defined by what you do rather than what you say - that is, both ancient and modern confessions of faith are under attack. It is hard to see in what sense those who wrote the creeds could be described as Europeans.

have an experience of faith in God that is not exhausted by black women or white men, then there is a need to articulate the faith of black women so that the universal church can learn from their experience with God."⁷

"If God is the God of the poor who is liberating them from bondage, how can we speak correctly about this God unless our language arises out of the community where God's presence is found? My limitation of Christian theology to the oppressed community does not mean that everything the oppressed say about God is right..... To do that would be to equate the word of the oppressed with God's word. There is nothing in Scripture which grants this possibility..... to be outside this community is to be in a place where one is excluded from the possibility of hearing and obeying God's word of liberation."⁸

"More than any other text I have written, A Black Theology of Liberation represents the new start I tried to make in theology. Alone in Adrian, Michigan, searching for a constructive way in theology that would empower oppressed blacks, the motive of liberation came to me as I was rereading the Scripture in the light of African-American history and culture."⁹

"There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused..... My definition and the assumptions on which it is based are to be tested by the working out of a theology which can then be judged in terms of its consistency with a communitarian view of the ultimate..... The definition of theology as the discipline that seeks to analyze the nature of the Christian faith in the light of the oppressed arises chiefly from the biblical tradition itself."¹⁰

"It is a sad fact that the white church's involvement in slavery and racism in America simply cannot be overstated..... Racism has been part of the life of the Church for so long that it is virtually impossible for even the 'good' members to recognize the bigotry perpetuated by the Church..... [but] [r]acism is a complete denial of the Incarnation and thus of Christianity. Therefore the white denominational churches are unchristian."¹¹

9. Second, Bishop V Devasahayam from our linked Diocese in Madras, himself a Dalit, given a chance to escape from his village with the provision of a Church of South India hostel where he could stay while he was at school, writing for Dalits who are the majority of Christians in his diocese:

Context: The Premise of purity and pollution

Ceremonial purity is the Hindu's most prized possession. Since pollution affects their status in the next birth, Hindus would want to strictly adhere to the norms of purity and avoid pollution at all

⁷ Cone: *For My People* (Orbis 1984): p 135

⁸ Cone: *Speaking the Truth* (Eerdmans 1986) p 9

⁹ Cone: *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Orbis 1988) p xxi (1986 Preface)

¹⁰ Cone: *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Orbis 1988) pp 1 f

¹¹ Cone: *Black Theology & Black Power*: pp 72, 73 see also pp 80 - 85
see also Cone: *God of the Oppressed* (Seabury Press 1975) p 243: "...just because we sometimes worship alongside them should be no reason to claim that they are truly Christians..." and Cone: *For My People* (Orbis 1984) p 52

costs. The notion of purity and pollution emerges from the Hindu perception of the nature of the structure of the sacred in which a distinction is made between pure gods and impure gods on the basis of gifts offered to and accepted by these gods. The gods to whom flowers and fruits are offered are considered pure gods and those to whom animal sacrifices are made are considered impure gods. In other words, Gods worshipped by the twice born castes are considered to be pure ones whereas the Gods worshipped by Sudras and Dalits are considered impure. This distinction is extended to cover all aspects of earthly life - people, places, things, professions and even time.

The Dalits are considered impure, polluting and hence Manusmriti marks off this group as untouchable, unapproachable and unseeable. The higher one's caste is, the more sensitive he/she becomes to pollution by Dalits and hence the prescription of a graded distance from the different levels of upper castes. The Dalits are required to maintain a distance of 33 feet from Vaisyas, 66 feet from Kshatriyas and 99 feet from Brahmins. Dalits are considered impure due to the fact of their birth and their "polluting" professions and hence are banned from temples, schools, public streets, etc.

In India, the land of compassion, where cow is worshipped and considered sacred, fellow human beings, the Dalits are treated worse than animals. One may touch an animal, say a dog but Hindu Sastras maintain that touch of a fellow human being, a Dalit, is polluting. The Dalits known as untouchables continue to live like the lepers in Palestine before and during the time of Jesus. But the irrationality of Indian reality is that pollution is caused not from any contagious disease but by birth and remains as such till one's death. In India, a Brahmin afflicted by leprosy considers himself/herself polluted by the approach or touch of a healthy Dalit! It is in this context of the prevailing notions of purity and pollution that we would like to consider some of the christological titles.

Reflections on Christological titles

Son of Mary (Mk. 6:3)

Joachim Jeremias in the book *Jerusalem in Jesus' Time* maintains that the people in Palestine were divided into three groups: People of pure blood (Pharisees) Mixed blood (Samaritans) and Impure blood (gentiles and sinners - sinners are those who did not keep the Law and were involved in impure professions). He goes on to show clearly that Jesus associated himself with the people of mixed and impure blood and was antagonistic towards those who considered themselves pure blooded.

The title "Son of Mary" was given to Jesus by his critics and was used in a derogatory sense to embarrass Jesus of his questionable progeny. It is significant that Matthew includes the names of four women in his account of the genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Batsebah. While Rahab and Ruth are of non Jewish origin, Tamar and Batsebah are Jewish women of questionable character. The contention of Matthew in giving the names of these four women is to demonstrate that the children of irregular marriages are entitled to be called "Son of David" . He also seeks to question the Jewish claim to the pedigree descent. More important of his contentions is that Jesus has inherited impure blood in him through Rahab and Ruth and has therefore identified himself with the people of mixed and impure blood.

Galilean (Lk. 23:6)

Jesus was called a Galilean because of his choice of Galilee for his residence after his return from the sojourn in Egypt. "He withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth". The Gospels tell us that Jesus's disciples too were Galileans (Mk. 14:70). Galilee

is nicknamed as Galilee of the Gentiles, in Indian terms the cheri (Where Dalits live) of Palestine (Mt. 4:15).

New Testament scholar Dhyanchand Carr attributes three reasons for the Jewish contempt for Galilee. Firstly, it was the land assigned to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali which were regarded as "cursed tribes". The prejudice against Naphtali could be due to the fact of his being the son of a slave woman while the prejudice against Zebulun could simply be irrational. Secondly, Galilee was situated in the trade route between Assyria and Egypt and hence the people of Galilee came into contact with the polluting people and also accepted gentile cultural modes. Thirdly, the religion of the people of Galilee was not considered orthodox. The Zealot sect - a radical revolutionary group had its origin in Galilee. The dominating religion of the Pharisees seeks to marginalise the liberative religion through perpetuating prejudices against Galilee in the name of purity and pollution. Matthew affirms that it is the Galileans who sit in "darkness" that have seen a great light.

One recognises close parallels between the Jewish prejudice against Galileans and the upper caste prejudice against Dalits because they are a slave caste, associated with polluting professions and follow an equalitarian and liberative religion. Dalit religion up holds a God who is poor and the festival of Lingappa is celebrated by Dalits with dirty and tom clothes. Lingappa, the Dalit God refuses the building of the temple saying: "I want the experience of cold and heat as you experience". This God of Dalits is to be contrasted with Hindu Gods for whom big temples are built and are anointed with costliest ghee and milk. Dalit religion is condemned as unorthodox by Hindus and Dalit themselves become untouchables. The truth remains that Jesus has not only taken the impure blood in his person, but has chosen to live in a Palestinian cheri along with those who were considered impure.

Son of Man (Mk. 10:45)

The title "Son of Man" is a unique christological title because it is the one Jesus used for himself to describe his vocation. "For the son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The title, son of Man as conceived by Jesus is closely associated with the figure of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. The other New Testament terms such as doulas (bondslave) diakonas (table waiter) and hyperetes (Under rower) bring out the most degrading position of the servant. Jesus assumes the role of a servant to demonstrate that God does not create human beings for servitude but takes the form of a suffering servant in Jesus Christ. He assumes it in order to relieve us of our suffering as well as servitude. Jesus's identification with Dalits, the serving caste has the potential to dismantle the unjust order of master and slave. It is interesting that the Dalit perception of God comes close to the one Jesus expressed. Saguni Ranga, a Dalit God was conceived as a servant God ('Saguni' in Kannads means 'Cowdung'). Devotees went to Saguni Ranga with their demands threatening him with punishment if their demands were not met within a stipulated time. If their prayers are not heard, they go to Saguni Ranga punish him throwing chilli powder on his face and beat him with broomsticks. This sounds anathema for traditional piety but a revolutionary way of conceiving God as a servant.¹²

10. These theologies arise very clearly from the context of their writers. It is not surprising then that these theologies have a more or less explicit political dimension – their writers are interested in improving the lot of their people. The basic premise of the political programmes is that the God who called his people out of Egypt and led them from slavery to freedom in the promised

¹² V Devasahayam: *Outside the Camp : Bible Studies in Dalit Perspective* (Gurukul, Madras 1992) p 23

land under the leadership of Moses is a God who wants freedom for all his people – hence the title liberation theologies. They assert that God wants freedom from oppression, from poverty, from hunger, from addiction, from abuse; and just as Pharaoh was unwilling to let the people go so the oppressors are unwilling to let the oppressed go.

11. There are some other contextual theologies with perhaps less of an explicitly political agenda. For example, in Africa one problem for the Christian church is its colonial legacy. When I worked in Ghana in the late 70s we used the Book of Common Prayer, and Hymns Ancient & Modern and the choir wore cassocks and surplices. The Cathedral in Accra had been the Garrison Chapel: the stones to build it were shipped out from England and put together from the design of an English architect who I think had never been to Africa. The nearest approach to Ghanaian culture was the translating of some of the hymns in the hymn book into Ghanaian languages but still set to the same music as the originals. I can still sing off by heart the first verse of ‘How sweet the name of Jesus sounds’ in a language called Ga but to the English tune. And so some African theologians have attempted to work at stripping away the English overlay of Christianity, a task which has a certain irony to it given that the early church was actually strongest in North Africa and St Augustine may have been black.
12. Less well known still is another sort of contextual and political theology but from a right wing stance. Michael Novak, of Polish Catholic extraction, writes to support democratic capitalism, particularly in its American form:

Alone among the systems known to human kind, democratic capitalism has tried to preserve the sphere of the person inviolable. It glories in divergence, dissent, and singularity. It has done so by inventing a set of practical principles embodied in institutions and jealously guarded by rival interests, each of considerable power, by which social co-operation may be achieved.¹³

The habit of mind designated by a term like enterprise depends for its very existence upon belief in a world of emergent probability. A world not logical, geometric, perfectly predictable, on the one hand nor on the other totally mad, irrational, and impervious to intelligence.¹⁴

A political economy which wishes to be as creative as possible must try to invent a system which permits persons of talent in all fields to discover their talents, to develop them, and to find the social positions in which their exercise bears maximal social fruit.¹⁵

¹³ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 65

¹⁴ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 76

¹⁵ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 85

The economic system of democratic capitalism depends to an extraordinary extent upon the social capabilities of a human person.¹⁶

Intelligence is the primary form of capital. Oil lay beneath the sands of Arabia for thousands of years relatively without value to the human race until the application of human intelligence found a use for it. Countless parts of God's creation lay fallow for millennia until human intelligence saw value in them. The cause of wealth lies more in the human spirit than in matter.¹⁷

The founders of democratic capitalism sought intelligibility by a different route, indirect rather than direct, counter intuitive but effective. They understood that predictions about scores of millions of economic transactions by millions of free economic agents exceed the capacity of human intelligence. They sought a humbler way. They saw great worth in liberty.¹⁸

Theologically speaking the free market and the liberal polity follow from liberty of conscience. The image of God underlying socialist thought is *nous* – the all seeing commanding intelligence. The image of God underlying both the free market and the triune system of democratic capitalism is *phronimos* – the practical provident intelligence embodied in singular agents in singular concrete situations.¹⁹

Commercial virtues are not then sufficient to their own defence. A commercial system needs taming and correction by a moral-cultural system independent of commerce. At critical points it also requires taming and correction by the political system and the state. The founding fathers did not imagine that the institutions of religion, humanism and the arts would ever lose their indispensable role. They did not imagine that the state would wither away. Each of the three systems needs the other.²⁰

The vocation of the layman lies in producing wealth, economic self reliance, industry and commerce and in being creative stewards.²¹

To look upon human history as love-infused by a creator who values others as others, who sees in those originating sources of insight and choice which we have come to know as “persons” the purpose of his creation; and who in loving each as an individual creates of the contrarious many an unseen, hidden, but powerful community, is to glimpse a world in which the political economy of democratic capitalism makes sense.²²

¹⁶ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 94

¹⁷ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 103

¹⁸ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 104

¹⁹ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 112

²⁰ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 121

²¹ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 279

²² Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 355
see also Novak: *Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions* (Harper & Row, San Francisco: 1989) p 164 “What works is a social organisation for personal creativity. A society so constructed reflects the image of the Blessed Trinity, the Creator of all things, Lord of history, Spirit brooding over dark creation.”

I do not regard capitalism as a sort of amoral, neutral, culture-free, set of abstract techniques without any moral content except for the ends injected into it by its user. By contrast with the ethos shaped by traditional agrarian, feudal, and socialist, societies even the capitalist part of democratic capitalist societies imposes a rather high moral discipline, inherent in the habits and attitudes internal to, and required for, capitalist development. Among those attitudes are not merely industriousness, enterprise, sound work habits, and a willingness to live under a rule of law, but also a sense of cooperation, attentiveness to customers, openness to strangers and alert curiosity.²³

“..... my own dream of undergirding the humaneness of liberal institutions with (as I see it) the more adequate Catholic philosophy of the human person, its deep sense of community, and its long-experienced respect for intermediate associations or mediating structures,”²⁴

“To a remarkable degree, the secrets of producing wealth are spiritual. A very great deal depends upon insights, attitudes, psychological disciplines, habits of social co-operation, a capacity for organisation, a passion for literacy and education, and a spirit of invention, creativity, and economic activism. Minorities which share such spiritual qualities typically demonstrate economic advancement even in the midst of majority populations still suffering considerable poverty. The cause of the wealth of nations is chiefly the human spirit, focused in a creative and productive way.”²⁵

13. If we take seriously these contextual theologies and their claims and assertions we need to make the effort to consider our own context and to write our own theology for our context. My suggestions for this are the second half of my paper.

Proposal for a new Theological Programme

14. Let me start the second half of this paper with an anecdote. Some recent surveys²⁶ have found that most Roman Catholics do not believe in Transubstantiation, a doctrine which tries to explain in detail what happens to the bread and wine at communion.²⁷ Theologians might be

²³ Novak: *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (2nd edition Madison Books, Lanham: 1991) p 434

²⁴ see Novak: *Freedom with Justice: Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions* (Harper & Row, San Francisco: 1989) p x
It continues : “... has been attacked both from the left and from the right.”

²⁵ Novak: *Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions* (Harper & Row, San Francisco: 1989) p 175

²⁶ At least three surveys (a Gallup survey in 1991/92 in America by telephone, a Gallup survey in 1994 for the New York Times, and a survey of Australian Catholic University Students reporting in May 2000) seem to show that only about one third of Catholics believe in Transubstantiation.

²⁷ An alternative approach was suggested by the World Council of Churches Conference at Lima, January 1982, when it contented itself with saying: “Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is unique...The Church confesses Christ’s real, living and active presence in the eucharist.” *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper No 111* (World Council of Churches, Geneva 1982) p12 §13. ARCIC went even further in its Final Report: “*Becoming* does not here imply material change... What we affirmed here is a sacramental presence in which God uses the realities of this world to

surprised, because this belief has been obligatory for Catholics since the Lateran Council of 1215, in the sixteenth century becoming a major ecumenical issue as the Protestants rejected it, and then the Catholic hierarchy re-affirmed it at the Council of Trent of 1544-1563.

15. The anecdote demonstrates a couple of things which many have suspected for a long time. First that theology has often been a matter of some people trying (unsuccessfully) to tell others what they ought to think; and second that its subject matter has been so peripheral to life that this did not really matter.
16. Another example of this is marriage. Although the Catholic and Anglican Churches have tried to hold the line that re-marriage after divorce is wrong or even impossible, most people – including many Christians – are prepared to accept the possibility of a second chance at a lifelong marriage. Of course what has happened here, as with contraception,²⁸ is that because the subject matter of the Church's pronouncements is actually important, it is the Church itself which has been marginalised. In fact the Church's battle to control marriage goes back to the Middle Ages, when gradually priests persuaded and pressurised couples to move the place where they made their vows from the lich gate to the church porch and then into church. It is a campaign the Church has not won.
17. So. I propose a new kind of Theology – a contextual, liberating, Theology – which would take these lessons to heart. That is to say that it would not be an attempt to tell others what they ought to think, and it would not be peripheral to ordinary life. It would therefore need to be clear about its audience and what is important to that group.
18. Liberation Theologies have claimed or attempted to offer a language of protest²⁹ and resistance for the dispossessed. What would a Liberation Theology for Britain, or more specifically Carlisle, look like? Who are the British poor? It is not to be denied that there are substantial

convey the realities of the new creation.. Before the eucharistic prayer.. the believer answers: 'It is bread.' After the eucharistic prayer... he answers: 'It is truly the body of Christ, the Bread of Life.'" *The Final Report of the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission* (SPCK, London 1982) p 21 §6b.

²⁸ The marginalisation of the Catholic Church over contraception may be a purely English view. European Catholics may have been able to combine a more respectful view of the Church with a distancing of themselves from its teachings about contraception.

²⁹ Long claims: "Theological language is primarily protest – against the market and against the church....." He goes on to suggest the idea of performance: "A good theological performance of the relation between theology and economy will give the church and the market their appropriate roles....." Long : *Divine Economy* (Routledge, London 2000) p 268

areas of deprivation in Britain, and some commentators argue that an underclass is still developing despite the rhetoric and policy of Government. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that compared to the poorest of the world there must be very few in Europe who are truly poor.

19. Are we then the rich and the oppressors? It does not feel like that. Perhaps most of us exist somewhere between the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors;³⁰ by the same token, most of us are neither rural nor urban, but sub-urban.³¹ We live in the middle, not the extremes, and we hold things together.³² Of course, characterising an audience in this way does not provide a clear definition for it, but then that is appropriate for those in the middle: moreover, clear definitions are often about excluding rather than including, and so about control rather than conversation. We will have to be content with a characterisation as “ordinary.”

20. This new kind of theology would need to adopt a listening stance towards its audience. This might seem to open it to the accusation that it does not reveal the voice of God and eternal reality, but only describes popular opinion. However, since God does not seem to communicate directly with us, we have actually to deal with the question of which people to listen to. William of Malmesbury (c1080-1143) quoted an old proverb: *vox populi, vox dei*: the voice of the people is the voice of God. Why not? The groups formerly most prominent in setting the programme for theology should not continue to have the only voices. Theology needs to see itself as a conversation between the Bible, the Christian community, and the wider world.³³ It is this conversation which both makes and tests theology’s faithfulness to Christianity.

³⁰ “The oppression experienced by a daily commuter in a large Northern conurbation, or a checkout assistant in a supermarket, or a democratic politician hoping to avoid de-selection by his/her party have attracted astonishingly little notice from the political theologians of our generation.” Oliver O’Donovan : “*Political theology, tradition and modernity*” in ed C Rowland : *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (CUP, Cambridge 1999) p 246

³¹ The Church of England, for example, has published *Faith in the City* (Church House Publishing, London 1985) and *Faith in the Countryside* (Church House Publishing 1990) – but not yet “Faith in the Suburbs”!

³² Interestingly, the Revd Steve Chalk gave a seminar at the 2003 Keswick Convention on the subject of how and why the church should be the glue that holds society together. ‘The social infrastructure is unravelling’ he said. ‘We have to give people an alternative community.. that is the task of the church.’

³³ “As soon as we start thinking in relational, rather than in doctrinal terms to describe the dynamic between the church and the community, two things happen. One is that the boundaries between church and community start to disappear, at least in our minds – what we are talking about is people being friends, seeing ‘with’ and ‘for’ each other. The second thing is that we are compelled to pay serious attention to what it is to be church in a way which gives credence and authenticity to the things which we most deeply believe, including credal statements and theological doctrines.” Susan Hope : “*Sanctuary*” in ed Peter Sedgwick : *God in the City* (Mowbray, Oxford 1995) pp 191-198

21. The 2001 Census showed that over 77% of people called themselves Christian, and indeed the majority of them called themselves Anglican; yet we know that they do not attend Church regularly. What is going on? It seems that people think that being Christian is not about active membership of an institution, nor about doctrinal assent, but about lifestyle. This is born out by anecdotal experience of most clergy at, for example, funerals: the bereaved relatives are most concerned to tell clergy that the person who has died was kind, caring, unselfish, generous, and so on. If we are taking a genuinely listening stance, then we must at least consider the possibility that the Church has too often insisted on people being Christian in its way, rather than in their way. If this possibility were accepted, it would mean profound changes for the Church's mission: now we would have to think about how to be the Church for those who don't come.
22. What else would distinguish it? In the examples at the beginning, I hinted at both the importance and failure of the Church's thinking on marriage and contraception.³⁴ A theology worth writing would be one which made a difference. Therefore it would be about something which seemed to be important not only to Christians, but also to non-Christians, and it would, along the lines of Liberation Theologies, make that difference to and through the ordinary people who are its first audience. It would support and sustain our difficult but ordinary lives.³⁵ It would give us the power to think against the grain³⁶ and the power to celebrate.

³⁴ In the early years of the 20th century all the Churches opposed contraception; gradually other Churches softened their stance leaving only the Roman Catholic Church to continue in its opposition. Whilst the Roman Catholic view is inconsistent – for even they do not prohibit all sex which could not lead to conception – and is also profoundly unhelpful to families trying to follow it, it does have a point. For as soon as you begin to use reliable contraception, questions about conception reverse: instead of making a decision not to have a child, you have to make a decision to try to conceive. From making a decision to have a child it is only a few short steps to seeing a children as commodities about which you can decide.

It is interesting that this insight is not much publicised: is it that a determinedly dogmatic posture makes it impossible to have a discussion, even when that prevents you making the only point in your favour?

³⁵ “A liberation theology sustains our difficult but ordinary lives, empowers and collaborates with individuals and groups of people with disabilities who struggle for justice in concrete situations, creates new ways of resisting the theological symbols that exclude and devalue us, and reclaims our hidden history in the presence of God on earth.” Nancy Eiland *The Disabled God* (Abingdon, Nashville, USA 1994) p 86 quoted in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Blackwell, Oxford 2000) p 112

³⁶ The power of religious language is seen in the work of James Cone eg *Black Theology and Black Power* (Seabury Press 1969), and also in Rastafarianism, and in the stories of Winstanley and Muenzer (see Christopher Rowland: *Radical Christianity* (Polity Press 1988) pp 89 ff and passim): it is the power to resist, especially the power to resist oppression. A particular danger for those who are oppressed is that they are robbed of the possibility of thinking differently. This is of course the point of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (numerous editions since 1949 eg: Martin Secker and Warburg 1976): that independent thought became nearly impossible because of the re-writing of history and language – think of the Ministries of Truth, Love, Peace – and the official language itself, Newspeak. Again, slaves were denied their own languages, preserving them only with difficulty, and imperfectly. They, and others, found in the Bible a language which could support and encourage them and enable them to think “against the grain.”

23. Need this theology's topics cover the whole range of traditional theology? Perhaps not; theology's range has changed over the years. Consider two examples. First, the death of believers before the second coming of Christ was an important question for St Paul, but one not touched since. Second, the Church's stance on nuclear weapons was not an issue at all before about 1944, (obviously!) but grew in importance until the 1980s, more recently has receded and could re-surface with the present Bush administration's Strategic Defence Initiative.

In any case, attempts to write an exhaustive systematic coverage of any area of human thought, as well as being arrogant, are doomed to failure. Godel demolished Russell's attempts to do this in mathematics, and the postmodernists have perhaps done the same for philosophy.³⁷ Instead, I offer a series of conversations.

24. This theology could well be more based on narrative than abstract writing – indeed it might include anecdote.³⁸ The recognition of narrative as a category has grown in recent years, not only in theology but also in literary criticism. Alongside the epics of the Old Testament, the parables of Jesus, and the lives of the saints and heroes of the Christian tradition, we can set the stories of God's ordinary people.

25. Why this focus on ordinary people? Of course, there are a lot more people in the middle than at the extreme edges; certainly they may command some of our attention. But there is more to this than that. I take it as suggestive, and more than suggestive, that the Gospels show Jesus as located somewhere in the middle of his society – not rich, certainly, but not the poorest either. He attends a wedding and eats and drinks with others; two of his disciples only have a net, but two others have a boat and hired men; he has had an education; he has followers who are wealthy enough to support him – one in Jerusalem even owning an upper room; his 'father' is a carpenter; he has a woven cloak.... He is aware of the poorest – the jobless standing in the

³⁷ cf John McDowell's paper: *Donald MacKinnon's Theological Performance of the Ordinary* (published on the Internet 2001) in which he points out Rowan Williams's thinking about the danger of stepping back from the risk of conversation into a position of (imagined) invulnerability by displaying the real subject matter as a strategy for the retention of control. Williams' target is what he calls "the tyranny of a total perspective", that which subsumes all knowing into a framework laying claims to comprehensiveness and finality.

³⁸ Quite properly: one (over)view of the Bible is that it is the story of God's dealings with his people: i.e. it is the Biography of Israel. cf ed Ingrid Rasa Kitzberger : *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (Routledge, London 1999) This collection of post-colonial writings is predicated on the view that the personal voice – the autobiographical element – is central to a proper, authentic interpretation of the Bible. See, also, McFadyen: *The call to personhood* (CUP 1990) passim e.g.: 'the social codes and structures which are simply "given" for persons are not arbitrary realities antithetical to the personal, but ossifications of previous personal communication; they are not so much objective as inter-subjective realities.' p 84

market place waiting for someone to hire them – but he is not one of them.

26. Interest in ordinary things and everyday life may also be seen as a continuation of the ancient world's Wisdom tradition,³⁹ and especially its representation in the Hebrew Bible in Proverbs. Proverbs draws its wisdom from longstanding and deep reflection on actual experience. It is true that the “centre of gravity” of proverbs is located in the class of people composing a royal court, and some aspects of the Wisdom tradition are dismissive of manual workers in comparison with scribes. But many proverbs reflect a more general interest, and seem to have been taught in schools which were quite widely accessible to ordinary people. Secondly, Proverbs, and the Wisdom tradition generally, are usually specific and concrete. Even when attempting to deal with complex issues about ultimate reality, the Wisdom tradition offers a narrative.
27. It is the ordinary people who keep things going:– they pay the taxes, do the volunteering, bring their babies to be christened, worry about the future, join the PTA, do up their homes and gardens.... It is their disengagement from politics which is disturbing; it is their compliance which makes a rule of law possible. They keep stable the structure of society.
28. Through the media we are instructed that what is important is the doings of the great and the good and celebrities. Yet Agatha Christie seems more authentic:

“ “But think, said Victoria, “of all the people who will be killed first.”

”You don’t understand,” said Edward. “That doesn’t matter.”

It doesn’t matter – that was Edward’s creed. And suddenly, for no reason, a remembrance of that three thousand years’ old coarse pottery mended with bitumen flashed across Victoria’s mind. Surely those *were* the things that mattered – the little everyday things, the family to be cooked for, the four walls that enclosed the home, the one or two cherished possessions. All the thousands of ordinary people on the earth, minding their own business and tilling the earth, and making pots and bringing up families and laughing and crying and getting up in the morning and going to bed at night. *They* were the people who mattered.....”⁴⁰

³⁹ See eg E W Heaton : *The Hebrew Kingdoms* (OUP 1968) pp 165 ff

⁴⁰ Agatha Christie : *They Came to Baghdad* (Fontana, London 1954) p 167

29. Pieter Breugel the Elder (c 1525 – 1569) is notable for depicting ordinary everyday peasant life in his paintings,⁴¹ and for being the first in western art to depict children, who previously had simply been ignored as a subject in their own right.⁴² So remarkable was this that he was nicknamed Peasant Breugel when distinguished from his sons.⁴³ Even after Breugel, few if any painters painted realistic, unembellished, scenes of ordinary life. A painter such as Caravaggio, who scandalised the church with his depiction of imperfections in religious scenes, nevertheless painted idealised figures with flawless skin and physique. We should be aiming to do for theology what Breugel did for art.

30. Let me give a list of topics which this theology might cover:

- a. dieting, fitness, and self-image⁴⁴
- b. what are we waiting for? what is success?
- c. celebrities – why do we think their lives matter to us ?
- d. flowers at the roadside
- e. chaos and debt and fear
- f. crowds: moral man and immoral society
- g. choice and shopping
- h. environment – act as if dying tomorrow and in 1000 years: eschatology
- i. trust – cf Reith lectures
- j. racism – distrust? boundaries –
- k. change
- l. Church offers doctrines : Trinity, Creation, Incarnation, Resurrection etc; suburbia is interested in : Home, School, children, Bowls.... Is a halfway house : Festivals ?
- m. cheapness v cost : neighbourhood watch without true neighbourliness
- n. waiting
- o. symbols, signs, and icons : a poor or a rich culture?
- p. the sacred, and its technicians – incl : why get married/have your baby christened?

⁴¹ To be sure, van Eyck, Bosch, and Grunewald, earlier Netherlandish painters, are Breugel's antecedents in this realism, but Breugel goes further both in his subject matter and in its treatment.

⁴² see Rose-Marie & Rainer Hagen : *Breugel : The Complete Paintings* (Taschen, Koln 2000) p 31

⁴³ Pieter Breugel the Younger (c1564-1638, also known as Hell Breugel) and Jan Breugel the Elder (1568-1625, also known as Flower or Velvet Breugel)

⁴⁴ Irenaeus : "He displayed the true image by himself becoming what his image was; and he made the likeness secure by uniting manhood to the likeness of his unseen Father."

- q. The way people treat children – highly abusive...
- r. Hairdressing - escape route for girls
- s. Baby – escape for girls and boys – their attempt to have a proper family after muddles in their pasts
- t. Relationships – abusive or equal – Lolita
- u. Relationships – all's fair in love and war
- v. Everything matters quite a bit – nothing matters very much
- w. competition and co-operation
- x. all this stuff about the hospice – and remembrance and flowers by the roadside – it's like ancestor worship
- y. ordinary people and experts – “in my opinion”.... Bad Thoughts A Dictionary of Idiocy? MMR jab – evidence v hysteria....
- z. reticence – ordinary people don't discuss all this stuff – pearls before swine – not everything on display in the shop window
- aa. how to live – meaning and purpose – NB do people want individual answers – is this different from the more political stuff..... ?
- bb. risk, and being risk averse; fear

31. These subjects have arisen out of my experience as a parish priest over the last 19 years – some of them are, for example, points where something I said in a sermon connected with the congregation, or where something in the news or something members of the congregation said connected with me. They are therefore the result of careful listening over those years, but that process needs to continue and the list be amended accordingly.

32. I wrote just now that these subjects arose out of my experience. I can only write as myself. I am not sure I can claim to be an ordinary person – clergy probably shouldn't claim that! So this new theology, where written by me, can only make the claim that it is the voice of a Vicar of an ordinary congregation. We probably should be dubious about the idea that the voice of the poor, or anyone else, has authority; this theology will make no claims of authority at all. A more testing question will be whether it is interesting.

33. This theology would be published in local newspapers and on local radio. It would therefore be necessary to develop its ideas in depth through shorter sections and then maintain interest and

continuity over several sections published in different issues. Its language would need to be quite different from the more formal, almost academic, style in which this paper is written.

34. It might make links with other theologies. For example, it seems that Islam has offered to ordinary people a number of modes of resistance to what it sees as secular western corruption. Whilst the violence of some of this resistance is horrifying to the west, there are other things going on in Islam as well. We might reflect on the following examples: the attempt to hold on to a different model of family life; the debate about the wearing of headscarves in schools, which some secular states (France and Germany, for example) are attempting to ban as a display of religion, but for which young people are campaigning as a symbol of resistance;⁴⁵ at least anecdotally, the preference of some Moslem families in Britain for Christian church schools over secular ones; Islam continuing to make converts – some quite high profile, others much less so – in America, Europe and India, as people search for meaning and purpose; the fact that Fukuyama’s “End of History” and some of the debates around it that marginalise Islam and disregard it as not entering the general consensus taking shape around liberal democracy. Given the relation between Christianity and Islam, a link might be very interesting. Buddhism, too, has attracted new adherents wishing for an alternative world-view; it seems also to have sustained people (for example in Tibet) in the face of adversity.

35. There seem to be several lines of thought which are converging on this area of thinking. One of these is the sociology of religion, or more precisely Implicit Religion, looking at what people actually believe. Another is some of the thinking coming out of Pastoral (or practical) Theology: some writers are interested in the empowerment of people, which ties in with this new theology’s possibilities for resistance ; others have been interested in congregational studies, which relates to the more listening stance I am advocating for the Church. However the third line, Political Theology does seem to be quite different from these first two. It has mostly been seen as dealing with the poor and dispossessed, rather than the ordinary.⁴⁶ But Political Theology should not ignore the political realities of life of that large group of people in the middle.

⁴⁵ see reports in the Guardian and Independent newspapers 25th September 2003; one of the examples reported concerns two sisters whose father is an atheist Jew and whose mother is Muslim, and who are growing up in France, facts which strongly support my thesis.

⁴⁶ Although Michael Novak’s work is an important exception.

36. How would this theology connect up with the great issues which run through our society? I am thinking here of the junction points where the old meets the new⁴⁷ : of issues such as the development of a global economy and information network, pluralism,⁴⁸ changing population profiles and behaviours,⁴⁹ the escalating imbalances in power and wealth in the world,⁵⁰ the changing environment.⁵¹ At first sight, these larger trends may seem to be irrelevant to ordinary people trying to get on with their everyday lives and to be more the province of the great and the good, or to cause yet more misery to the marginalised. However the converse is more likely to be true: the lives of the very poor will continue to be wretched and basic; the lives of the very rich will continue to be insulated from the vicissitudes of life; it is the ordinary people in the middle who will be most affected.

37. One role for this new theology might be, as I have already hinted, to provide support for resistance. Is resistance useless? Ultimately, probably yes. Even so, we might hope to divert, slightly, the course of events, or even to create a niche where we can take cover. Or we might hope to survive in a different way, that is by being ourselves better fitted to the changing or new realities.

38. More importantly, if it speaks to ordinary people and offers them the possibility seeing that God is at work in his world and in their lives, and if it locates the Church in a listening and serving stance, if it enables faith in a secular society, and if in doing these it makes a difference to Church, people and world,⁵² it will have done some useful jobs.

39. So let me give you a flavour of what it might sound like. And here's my second apology and explanation. I should say that I don't think I have found the right voice; it will be neither Parish magazine letter, sermon, nor academic article, and needs a lot more time spent on it, probably in

⁴⁷ Bertholdt Brecht

⁴⁸ And with it the marginalisation of the Church, for at the moment we are no longer treated as a major player by those with power – which is why the treatment of the hierarchy by the media seems surreal.

⁴⁹ The population is aging in the west – especially Europe (though growing younger in Africa because of AIDS); it seems to be increasingly disengaged from politics and society cf *Bowling Alone*; it is composed of more people living alone; it requires mass customisation.

⁵⁰ Including such imbalances as racism.

⁵¹ Including, for example, the surfacing of new diseases, and GM crops, as well as global warming.

⁵² NB I am not assuming here that Church and world are necessarily and fundamentally different, but only thinking of those aspects of the two which are different.

consultation with a newspaper sub-editor!

40.

Example 1

“Bears are waiting in the shadows round every corner: if you step on the cracks they’ll get you.” That was a children’s game, but it isn’t any different for adults. Insecurity is with us all the time. If I take a cool look at myself, I can see that the times I get cross are when things seem to be disintegrating. If the house is untidy, or we seem to be spending too much, or things get broken or lost, or the children are unruly, I begin to get very uneasy. Even though actually, as a Vicar, my situation is much more secure than most, I sometimes feel that we’re only one step away from chaos, and that we can only keep it at bay with the utmost effort and discipline.

Others have more reason to feel insecure. Think of those who work for agencies, and are made redundant just before Christmas every year. It’s good for the employers: these workers never accrue the rights of permanent staff. But it’s not so good for the workers and their families! Or what about those going through the break-up of a relationship? They may stand to lose not only a home, but also, with the emotional upheaval, their ability to hold on to their jobs may be affected. Then it’s only a couple of lurches to a hostel for the homeless. Not everyone slips, but some do.

I have a batik picture of St Peter. It’s early in the morning and he is out in a boat fishing. He has just seen Jesus walking across the lake towards them in the boat. Peter, full of enthusiasm, begins to walk on the water towards Jesus, but then panics and begins to sink. Jesus reaches out and pulls him up. (You can find this story in St Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 14 verses 22-33; look also at St Mark chapter 6 vv 45-52, St John chapter 6 vv 16-21, and St John chapter 21 vv 7-8.) Water, in the Bible, may represent chaos and disorder. At the beginning of the Bible, when God creates the world, things start off with the earth ‘without form,’ and the spirit of God moving over the water. In this account, creation is actually about organising the water so that it’s in its proper places – in the heavens waiting to become rain, or neat and tidy on earth in the sea and rivers. And in the ancient world, death by drowning was the most feared of deaths. In this story of Peter, the water is more disorderly than usual, because there is a storm. Notice that it seems Peter can’t swim. He sinks into chaos and muddle.

What prevents us from sinking completely, from being overwhelmed? Obviously, two things: our own hard work, and support from family and friends. Most people keep things more or less under control, keep things going, by effort and determination. We don’t make enough of this – because we all do it. But it is a significant achievement, just as great as walking on water would be. Instead of thinking of the failure of those who begin to sink, we should celebrate and admire the success of those who keep their own heads and the heads of others above water. By acts of faith and will, ordinary people keep things going, sustain ordinary everyday life. They are doing as much as Jesus, when he lifted Peter out of the water.

It was Peter's own silly fault he was trying to walk on the lake – he'd got himself into it – all too well in, in fact! What if Jesus had not been willing to reach out? We should realise that not only do we rely on others for support, but also for forgiveness and a generous spirit. Our first reaction to trouble may be to ask whose fault it is: lots of people operate in a "fix the blame" culture at work; but at home, I believe, we mostly "fix the problem." They might want to say "I told you so," but they mostly don't walk away. As well as keeping on top of their own lives, indeed as part of keeping on top, most folk take some responsibility for others. That's an amazing thing when you think first, how this is done on top of other burdens and second, how at odds this is with what we're usually told about living in a selfish society. It's truly swimming against the tide.

So, when the children get too much, or the car fails its MOT, or there is a job that is beyond us; then it is to our family and friends that we turn for that extra bit of help we need. They then are the ones who, Christ-like, reach out and pull us up. You do not so much lend a hand as give yourselves. On behalf of the Church can I say "thank you."

Example 2

There was a fashion not too long ago for recordings of plainsong – do you remember "Canto Gregoriano"? Now the fashion may have moved on, and perhaps it's transcendental meditation again, or the Aborigines. We're told that this is because people are searching for spirituality – but they don't find it in the Church.

I'm not really surprised. I suspect that what people may really want is spirituality without cost. There was a piece in the media recently about the ability of Buddhist monks to change their automatic reactions to sudden noises – something scientists thought was impossible. The experimenters then did tests on a group of people who had worked at meditation for about eight weeks. They found that people in that group were also able to influence their reactions to some extent. The interesting thing is not that meditation could make a difference in quite surprising ways, but that the scientists thought eight weeks dabbling was at all comparable with a lifetime's discipline.

Of course there is spirituality in the Church, but it's not something you can pick up in three visits like a course of injections or a fake tan. As Yoda said, describing learning to be a Jedi, it takes the utmost seriousness and dedication.

Isn't there a similar avoidance of cost and commitment all around? Isn't Neighbourhood Watch often without neighbourliness? When I think of Neighbourhood Watch areas I have known, I can't imagine folk popping next door to borrow a cup of sugar, or leaving the front door open so that callers felt welcome! That's not just a cheap gibe. I'm pointing out that where there is active neighbourliness, there's little need for artificial schemes run from central Government. Neighbourhood Watch may make a difference but it is a substitute for the real thing.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days to prepare himself. The Gospels tell a story about what happened at the end of that time. The devil offered him three temptations. He was tempted to satisfy his hunger, by

turning stones into bread. He was tempted to prove that God was looking after him, by throwing himself from the top of the temple then to be rescued by angels. He was tempted to take control of the whole world, by bowing before the devil.

The things which the devil suggested are not wicked. In fact they were very much the aims of Jesus' ministry. He wanted to feed the starving, to demonstrate confidence in God's care, to be Lord of the world. The temptation lay in the way of achieving them. In each case, Jesus was being invited to take a short-cut – instant food, instant love, instant power. In each case, the way that Jesus actually achieved these things led to, and was completed in, his crucifixion. So, for example, he fed the five thousand. This angered and frightened the Jewish authorities, and was part of the pattern of events leading to their determination to do away with him. Then, in the last supper, he talked of his body, broken for the world, and commanded us to share broken bread in remembrance of him. Stones turned to bread might have satisfied hunger straight away – but only for the time being. Instead there are Christians, and others, who spend their whole lives working to feed the hungry.

In rejecting the temptations, Jesus also shows that satisfying hunger is not our only need. And, even more important, that we are not defined simply by our needs. Our ability to “postpone gratification” as the psychologists put it, seems to be a particularly human ability. We learn the ability to do it as we grow up – small children cannot, as any parent knows. On the other hand, so many ordinary people do lead lives of mature adult commitment. Their patience can be misunderstood and lamented as “low expectations,” but perhaps it should be valued as a realisation that complex questions don't have simple answers and quick solutions.

In the 13th 14th 15th and 16th centuries Carlisle was at the heart of the area belonging to the Border Reivers. It saw many raids. But there are more ways than one of being a raider, and maybe Carlisle and Cumbrian people are rightly suspicious of those who come, make their presence felt and soon go. Jesus began his ministry with a rejection of the quick and the cheap. He ended it with an expression of his commitment to his people and what he stood for – he was crucified.