

- 25 See C. S. Lewis, *op. cit.* p 46. '... desert was finite: you could do so much to the criminal and no more. Remedial treatment, on the other hand, need have no limit; it could go on till it had effected a cure, and those who were carrying it out would decide when *that was*.'
- 26 i.e. effective freedom which is such as to foster, rather than impugn, the effective freedom of others.
- 27 How far the actual situation falls short of the ideal may be gathered from the Colour Supplement of *The Observer*, 14.9.1980,

Reflections on Torture —

Text of a sermon delivered at Westminster Abbey at the Human Rights Day Service on 10th December 1980

Sheila Cassidy

We have come together today as members of a Christian community because of our concern for the many thousands of men and women who are suffering persecution and torture throughout the world. Just as any divided family will forget its differences in times of crisis, so we are today united before God by that very problem.

Part of the excitement and also the difficulty of being a Christian is that it is a continuing process of exploring what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Just when we think we have got it sorted out, something happens to upset our complacency so that we are left, a little bruised, saying "where did I go wrong"? The only thing to do when that happens is to go back to the Gospels and look again to see how Jesus did it. As Paul tells us "Christ is the image of the unseen God". It is only by looking to Christ that we shall learn how to walk towards our Father.

I would like, then, to explore with you for a few minutes the stance of Jesus Christ in the face of torture — what he taught his disciples and how he faced his own torture and death. By focusing on the man Jesus we should then be able to widen our gaze, to look beyond his death on Calvary, to the continuing crucifixion in our own time.

The trouble about the gospels for many of us is that they become so familiar that they lose their impact; we cease to be rattled, unnerved, by what Jesus is saying. Take for example, Christ's assurance to his followers that they would be persecuted. "You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake" (Mk. 10:18), "Brother will betray brother to death and the father his child ... You will be hated by all men on account of my name". Perhaps we should ask ourselves not "Why are some people being

persecuted for their beliefs?" but, "Why is it not happening to us?" Could it be that we have so watered down the gospel message that it no longer brings us into conflict with the world? What a terrible irony it would be if the very people we condemn as being atheist are being persecuted for what are essentially Christian values, while we who call ourselves Christians have unwittingly allowed ourselves to be conformed to the values of the world.

Let us look for a moment at Christ's reaction to the bystanders at his passion. As he dragged his way painfully up the hill to Calvary he was followed by large numbers of people who wept and lamented for him. He turned and spoke to them and his message is terrifying "Weep not for me, weep rather for yourselves and for your children".

What should we take from this? For surely we must identify to some extent with these innocent bystanders at the crucifixion. Should we be weeping, not for the persecuted whose reward will surely be very great in heaven, but for ourselves, for our unwitting complicity in the crucifixions of today?

Let us consider for a moment what responsibility we bear for the torture in our own times. Torture is not just an evil that recurs from time to time, like the plague or Asian 'flu'. It is a particular manifestation of the violence that is the inevitable result of injustice. Throughout the developing world, violence erupts spontaneously because of unequal distribution of resources. Archbishop Helder Camara, for many years a voice of the powerless in the north east of Brazil, speaks of a spiral of violence. Where there is terrible poverty and hunger, where children die from malnutrition and untreated disease, there already exists a situation of "established violence". Those who fail to share their bread with the hungry, their house with the homeless, are committing an act of violence as surely as if they had fired a bullet. From this established violence there springs a reaction, a movement towards change, a revolution. And in opposition to this change there is the effort of the powerful to maintain the status quo, the determination to preserve goods and life-style at whatever cost. It is this opposing violence that is most likely to manifest itself as torture and repression, as fear of losing what they value drives men to take desperate measures to control the masses of the people.

What then is our complicity in this situation? There was a time when, for geographical or cultural reasons, we were unaware of the plight of the hungry and the homeless in other lands. That time has passed. Not only do the mass media bring the problems of famine and subhuman living into our homes, but there are daily more voices ready to explain to us how it is that our brothers are poor precisely *because* we are rich. We must come to understand

in economic terms what has long been accepted as a spiritual truth -- that no man is an island and that the wealth of one group is dependent upon the poverty of another.

This concept of economic interdependence is not easy to grasp and its consequences are extremely difficult to accept. We have been born and bred in a consumer society where multi-national corporations, agri-business and arms-trading are part of life. We have been educated to give to the poor but not to refuse a good business deal because the merchandise we sell might be misused. Our hearts are genuinely moved by the plight of the hungry -- but only to the extent of giving from our surplus. Real justice can only begin when we have no surplus and real love when we are moved to share with others what we genuinely need for ourselves.

These are very hard words, but the facts are inescapable. By accepting tranquilly a situation of injustice that provokes revolution and repression, we are guilty of complicity in oppression and torture. What then are we to do about our guilt? What can the guilty child ever do but return to his father, acknowledging his failure? But having failed we must, by God's grace, determine to succeed. If we own more than we need we must give it to those who do not have enough. If our government is trading with dictators and torturers, we must confront it and make it clear that we would rather be poor than be a party to repression. If we hear of torture and persecution we must denounce it, for we have been sent like Christ to proclaim the good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken and to set prisoners free. It may be that such prophetic behaviour will land us in trouble -- but then that is what Christ told his followers to expect.

Just as Jesus told his followers that they would surely be persecuted, he foretold that he himself was to suffer grievously. We know that the evangelists saw him prefigured in the prophecies of Isaiah "his form, disfigured, lost all the likeness of a man, his beauty changed beyond human semblance. He was despised, he shrank from the light of men, tormented and humbled by suffering".

It is not difficult to see in this passage not only Jesus but all the many thousands of men and women who have been harassed and tortured. Without majesty and beauty we see them: Bolivian peasants, protesting school children in Soweto, dissidents in a Soviet psychiatric hospital. There is no beauty in the tortured, only pain and disfigurement, "a thing from which men turn away their eyes".

Yet herein lies the mystery of our salvation -- it was this bruised and disfigured Christ who bore our sins, whose death bought us life. If we believe that we are all part of the body of Christ, then the tortured, defeated men and women of today are crucified

with Christ. Their suffering, appalling as it is, is part of the mystery of our redemption: by their scourging we are healed.

Just as Christ's gentleness in the face of persecution is a mystery to us, so is his attitude to his torturers, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". How much we have to learn about what it is to be Christ in the world! "But I say to you, 'Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you'. 'If a man takes your cloak, give him your shirt as well. If a man strikes you on the cheek, offer him the other one.'"

What in heaven are we being asked to do? How *can* we be expected to love our enemies? And yet we are. And how much more do the torturers need our love than their victims?

This then is Jesus' attitude in the face of torture, and as Christians we must make his stance our own. Let us accept quite simply and boldly that torture happens – that we bear within our frail nature the marks of the fall, the seeds of an evil which can erupt into a terrifying sadistic violence. There is nothing Christ-like in a refusal to accept the fact of torture because it is too unpleasant to think about. We must face the truth with courage – remembering that it will set us free.

And having accepted that this evil exists in our society, let us search by what means we can to eradicate it – and the search must always begin in our own hearts. Let us strive to understand the mechanisms of greed and fear which govern our own acquisitiveness and aggression so that we may better understand those in whom the same mechanism has escalated to an uncontrolled violence. Let us be ever wary of the acts of selfishness and cruelty in our daily lives which are the beginnings of violence. The harsh word, the mockery of others, the deliberate humiliation all lie at one end of a spectrum – at the other end of which are the hood, the hose-pipe and the electrode.

And when we face the oppressor, the torturer, whether from a distance or with no protective barrier between us, let us look beyond the mask of hatred until we discover the maimed and wounded person behind it. If we are able to do this it should no longer be impossible to obey the seemingly unreasonable command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

It is perhaps as well to speak here of the ever-present trap for those whose life is devoted to working for others. Because the problems confronting us are so overwhelming, we get drawn into ever greater activity until we forget that it is not us but the Lord who gives food to the hungry and the Lord who sets prisoners free. Let us always strive to balance our activity for the oppressed with prayer, and in this particular work we would do well to remember Christ's words to his apostles; that there are some devils that can

only be driven out by prayer and fasting. If we find ourselves impotent to unlock chains and prison doors, we would do well to lay siege to heaven with fasting and vigils. It is in this context that we can begin to understand the meaning of Christian hope. Expectation is founded upon probability and is bounded by human limitations. The expectations of the imprisoned and the tortured are bleak indeed. Christian hope, on the other hand, is founded upon the unshakeable conviction that God can and will bring about the unexpected and the beautiful. It is this hope that enables prisoners to endure privation and brutality and emerge without bitterness to an even deeper faith.

And lastly, on a more practical note, let us look for the concrete ways in which we here in England can bring help to the tortured. If we are not already involved in some form of work for prisoners of conscience, perhaps we should ask ourselves if this type of work is an optional extra or a Christian responsibility to the oppressed. And if those imprisoned for their beliefs seem very far away let us not forget those refugees who have been released from prison and come to make their homes with us. The agony of the tortured does not necessarily cease when the electrodes are removed or the blindfold loosened. It can take many years of love and support before deep psychological wounds are healed. It is important too, that we bear in mind that many men and women have been tortured by Christians with the declared intention of preserving what they believed to be a Christian civilization. It will be a long and painful task to undo the harm that our fellow Christians have done to the credibility of the gospel, and here we will find that actions speak louder than words.

I should like to end by returning once more to the foundations of all our hope: that God is love, and that love has the power to cast out fear. I leave you with the words of Kenneth Boulding:

“But though hate rises in enfolding flame
At each renewed oppression, soon it dies:
It sinks as quickly as we saw it rise,
While love’s small constant light burns still the same.
Know this: though love is weak and hate is strong
Yet hate is short, and love is very long.”