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THE END IS WHERE WE START FROM:
Politics, Penance and Prayer in Christian Ministry

In my talk this morning I want to explore some of the challenges and opportunities which we face, as Christian ministers, teachers and students, within rapidly changing political and economic landscapes, when the Church is also facing unprecedented challenges and changes to her traditions, institutions and practices. How can we express our Christian faith in such a way that we discover the wisdom and vision we need for these most extraordinary of times, drawing upon the riches of our own traditions and scripture, and in dialogue with other world views and perspectives, including those of secularism and different religious faiths?

Now that's a huge question, so I'm going to focus on some of the underlying questions which arise in the context of the current economic crisis from a Christian theological perspective. This is a critical and penitential process, but I don't think we humans respond well to an unmitigated diet of guilt and gloom. So, after what is necessarily a rather harsh consideration of the situation in which we find ourselves, I want to explore how, through the interdependence of penance and prayer, and through a renewed sacramental appreciation of the goodness of creation and our place within it, we might discover the resources for the task ahead, not only with regard to the demand for social justice in unjust times, but also with regard to the invitation to live graced lives in a graced creation. This means asking how we in turn can become an invitation to others to discover the joy of being rather than having, in lives positioned against the open horizon of God's eternal love.

In the Middle Ages, the Christian relationship to the world pivoted on a delicate fulcrum between *amor mundi* and *contemptus mundi* – love of the world and contempt of the world. On the one hand, there was a sense of the goodness of creation and our place within it. We live in a good world, in societies ordained by God for human flourishing, in a graced cosmos suffused with a spirit of harmonious interdependence and joy which speaks to us of God. On the other hand, we are alienated from God by sin, and only with difficulty do we reweave the tapestry of creation so that we are capable of recognizing and contributing to its beauty. The human alone, in all creation, has the freedom to praise or to despise, to willfully create or to willfully destroy, to accept the grace of God's love, or to reject it.

When we recognize that the world is created through the goodness and love of God, we must also recognize that original goodness is a more potent influence in our world than original sin. We can do good and love the world, and we can mend the social fabric in a million tiny ways which are more real and enduring than great revolutions with all their attendant violence and oppression. But that's only possible when we recognize the synchrony between the human heart and the social order, between the personal and the political, between freedom and the law, in a rightly ordered society.

For Thomas Aquinas, we human beings are animals who, along with the rest of God's creation, are destined for eternal union and joy with God. The only difference between the

human and every other species is that we alone are free to reject this vision. We are created for eternal joy with God, that is our most basic desire and it is the desire from which all other desires flow. When we understand that God, our ultimate desire, is always beyond our knowledge and grasping, God is the absence, the mystery, that shapes our being, then we can understand all our other desires as transient but graced expressions of God's love for us and our love for God. So, for Thomas, every human appetite and desire for the good things of life – food, sex, drink, possessions – is a potential channel of grace, and the joy that such things give us is real and good and a taste of God. But, when we fail to recognize God calling to us through our desire, when we confuse the good things of this world with that most basic desire for God which nothing of this world can satisfy, then our desires become distorted. In our insatiable desire for a joy which this world cannot give, we experience a proliferation of desires as our appetites move restlessly from object to object, craving ever more the happiness which eludes us. I don't think Thomas would be surprised to discover that a certain kind of atheism goes hand in hand with consumerism, for we are experiencing in our consumerist societies the quiet despair of the human animal cut off from its source and its purpose.

But, equally important, for Thomas the human animal is by very nature a political and social creature. God provides for us, not only in our material needs, but in our needs for laws and structures, for relationships and societies, capable of fulfilling our capacity for flourishing by providing us the social means we need for that flourishing to happen. When our political structures, our laws and institutions, become enemies of human flourishing, or allow for the flourishing of the few at the expense of the many, they are corrupted and unjust – and, as Thomas says following Augustine, an unjust law is not a law.

Now, I hope you're beginning to see where I'm going with this. The credit crunch undoubtedly has many complex economic causes and consequences, but I'm suggesting that its fundamental cause is the distortion of desire – the greed that proliferates in the human heart cut off from its source and its *telos*. Consumerism exploits this alienation. The greatest enemies of consumerism are contentment, happiness, the ability to be satisfied with enough rather than wanting more and more – the ability to be, rather than to have. So the politics of consumerism is rooted in the politics of misery, the endless stimulation of insatiable and restless desire, the capacity of our human appetites to multiply without end, when they have no end, no meaning, no focus. The psychologist Oliver James uses the term 'affluenza' to describe the psychological malaise of our western consumerist societies. The World Health Organisation estimates that, by 2020, the greatest cause of premature death and disability in the western world will be depression and mental illness. Such are the times we live in, and the current economic crisis calls us to a radical and far-reaching transformation of our values and desires.

Let me say at this point that I am not a radical pessimist about the state of the world in secular modernity. I don't seek to emulate Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre or John Milbank in fulminating against the evils of modernity, the loss of tradition, the disintegration of communities. Secular modernity has brought with it many good and positive benefits that, let's be honest, the Christian tradition was somewhat slow to deliver, particularly as far as women are concerned. With this in mind, it's important to recognize that the word 'crisis'

comes from the Greek '*krisis*', and it has positive as well as negative associations. A time of crisis is a time of risk but also a time of opportunity. It's a time of endings but also of beginnings. It is a time of trauma, but also of transformation. From a Christian perspective, a crisis is a *kairos* moment. It is a moment in which the luminous darkness of the mystery of God penetrates our hearts and minds with a particular intensity and power of awakening, so that we become alert to possibilities that we did not recognize before. So what might Christian ministry mean at times like these?

Well, having said I'm not a pessimist, I think we need to take a serious view of our present times – I want to suggest that these are times for a certain *contemptus mundi*, at least as far as the worlds of politics and economics are concerned.

If, as Thomas suggests, a rightly ordered and just society allows for the flourishing of all its members, then we should experience a sense of dismay when we look at the injustice of our present social and political order. Those who are marginalised and impoverished know how deeply the laws and institutions of society can impede their capacity to flourish, when they are biased towards the privileged, the wealthy, the powerful. At times like this, Christian preaching and teaching have no choice but to be political. Yes, consumerism, debt, the sub-prime crisis which started it all, can be traced back to the personal psychology as well as the politics of greed. It is individuals like me and maybe like some of you, with our credit cards and our mortgages, with our spiraling standards of living and our economic complacency, who have helped to create the problem, and questions of personal sin and cowardice in the face of systematic abuses of power become pertinent.

But the problem is also more than the sum of its parts. It is a political system which has become a voracious and insatiable consumer of people's lives. We have known for a long time how our economic system feeds on the lives of the poor, that there is a vast, unacknowledged dynamic of exploitation which haunts the edges of our consciousness as we rummage about the bargain basement which our culture has become, a culture saturated with banality and boredom beneath which breeds a growing despair. Is this it? Is this as good as it gets? But now, it's not just the poor and those who are so marginalised that we can comfortably ignore their existence. It's the ordinary home owners, it's our pensions, our taxes, the very lifeblood of our social institutions – health care, education, local councils – which are under threat as we raid the coffers to buy off the bankers. How easy it is to feed markets, and how impossible to feed children. Marx was right. The market has become the idol, the fetish which must be bribed, placated, flattered, reassured, lest it consume us all. I heard on the radio this morning that 'the markets have endured a brutal week.' That is outrageous language. Markets cannot endure – only humans can endure, and if we are talking about brutality, then we must talk about its human victims, not about markets.

This brings me from politics to penance. In times like these, what shape does repentance take? How are we to address this culture of despair and turn this time of crisis into a *kairos* moment?

First of all, we must not be politically naïve. There is widespread agreement that, in bailing out the banks, the government may have taken the best course of action open to it to prevent

the collapse of the world economy. But that confronts us with two possibilities: either it was too little too late, and we face an undreamed of crisis. The poor will become poorer, many who are not now poor will become poor, and those who are rich, powerful and avaricious enough to get away with it will probably become richer as our social institutions go into meltdown. Or, there is the risk that it will be business as usual. The gambit will pay off, the directors and speculators will begin quietly creaming off their obscene profits once again, and the rest of our society will gradually begin to reinvest its damaged faith in the false promises and seductions of the capitalist enterprise.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer joined the German resistance against Hitler, he wrote this:

[T]here are three possible ways in which the church can act toward the state: in the first place ... it can ask the state whether its actions are legitimate and in accordance with its character as a state; i.e., it can throw the state back on its responsibility. Second, it can aid the victims of any ordering of society, even if they do not belong to the Christian community — "Do good to all people." In both these courses of action, the church serves the free state in its free way, and at times when laws are changed the church may in no way withdraw itself from these two tasks. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke in the wheel itself.¹

I'm not suggesting that there is any comparison between Britain today and Nazi Germany, but I am suggesting that for too long, the British state has failed to act in the interests of its people, by subordinating the demands of social justice, shared values and a just distribution of resources, to the tyranny of corporate power and the politics of greed over need. It seems to me that Bonhoeffer's dictum serves us very well in such a situation: we must throw the state back on its responsibility, we must bandage the victims of the present crisis, and we must jam a spoke in the wheel of the kind of economic and political system which has brought us to this point, by insisting on dramatic economic and political transformation as the cost of our cooperation with the present bale-out.

During the last thirty years, the fabric of our society has been torn apart by the forces of violence, competitiveness, acquisitiveness and individualism at every level – from the violence of the state itself in its military escapades, to the violence of the alienated young people on the streets of our inner cities, who turn their fury and despair on one another because it has nowhere else to go. Vulnerable and impressionable psyches are shaped by an endless diet of mediocrity, banality and humiliation drip fed from our television sets into our homes every night, while the substance of our shared political life has dissolved into a stew of personal ambition, mediocrity and greed.

But penance has to begin with the church, with ourselves as Christians called to be in the world but not of the world, called to be a light to the world and salt of the earth. Bonhoeffer saw what ultimately happened in a society where a complacent middle class colonised the church and muffled its radical message by their conformity and compliance with the *status quo*. It was when he visited America and experienced firsthand both the vitality of faith in the

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995, p. 132.

black pentecostal churches and their political commitment to the victims of racism and poverty that he gained an insight into what was possible when the church functioned as a community of radical otherness on the side of the oppressed and the marginalised. Yet if we look at the role that the Christian Church has played in British public life during this time of declining political and economic values, we would be forgiven for believing that Christians primarily worship a God obsessed with sex and gender, given its muted and bumbling responses to war, economic exploitation and social alienation, and its vehement domestic rows which spill over onto every street corner, about who should be permitted to have sex with whom, and who should and shouldn't be permitted to wear a mitre.

Is it really true that God is so offended by homosexual relationships, and so outraged by women priests, that 'he' regards all other injustice, war, violence and oppression as secondary to this one burning issue? What a miserable God. Who would worship him? Who would love him? Who would desire him? (And it is appropriate to use exclusive language to describe this patriarchal, sexually-obsessed and jealous God, made in the image of the men who seek to control him).

But there is one message which runs through the Bible from beginning to end without ambiguity or contradiction, and that is the call to God's people to exercise justice towards the poor and the oppressed. 'What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6:8). Here is Psalm 10 – is this not a psalm for our times, one of a thousand readings we might pick out for such times?

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak,
Who are caught in the schemes he devises.

He boasts of the cravings of his heart;
He blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord.

In his pride the wicked does not seek him;
in all his thoughts there is no room for God.

His ways are always prosperous,
he is haughty and your laws are far from him;
he sneers at all his enemies.

He says to himself, "Nothing will shake me;
I'll always be happy and never have trouble."

His victims are crushed, they collapse;
they fall under his strength.

He says to himself, "God has forgotten;

he covers his face and never sees.”

Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God.
Do not forget the helpless.

You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted;
You encourage them, and you listen to their cry,

defending the fatherless and the oppressed,
in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.

(Again, I’ve decided not to change this to inclusive language – I don’t see many women’s names among the culprits in the present economic crisis).

This resounding cry is taken up by Christ and echoes through the gospels. He incarnates within himself the God of the destitute and the outcast, the God of the homeless and the persecuted, the God of the vulnerable and the crucified. He identifies his mission with the God of justice in Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Over the centuries, Christians have performed some wonderful linguistic conjuring tricks, making the poor disappear into a spiritual haze – “the Bible doesn’t mean the economically poor, it means that we’re all poor in spirit” – and transplanting the message of a barefoot peasant from Galilee into spiritual consolation for the wealthy and the elite, at least insofar as many of our Christian religious institutions in the West are concerned.

But if there is a single coherent thread running through the Old and New Testaments, a single message that is neither optional nor ambiguous, it is God’s justice and mercy for the poor and oppressed, and God’s righteous anger against the rich.

Poverty is not context-specific. Matthew 25 tells us that we are called to recognize Christ in the here and now reality of the hungry, the imprisoned, the sick, the stranger and outcast, the naked and homeless. As long as the present order exists, these Christ-figures will exist too, for Christ is everyman and everywoman who dwells on the margins of the world’s utopias. There is no political system, no ideology, no utopian vision, which has yet managed to deliver us from the evils of injustice, and that is why our political commitment as Christians must be attentive to the abuses inherent in every political theory, in every political party, in every political institution.

But this attentiveness is the opposite of opting out. It calls us to participation, to vigilance, to commitment, to hope, to seek the just, the good and the loving in every human situation, to call on the Lord while he is near, to seek her while she is to be found, and to recognize that penance is what liberates us to start anew, to acknowledge how often we fail, how often we are misguided and mistaken in our attentions and achievements, and to draw strength from

God's forgiving grace and God's good creation, to begin all over again and again and again, always beginning from the bottom, always beginning from the margins.

This brings me finally to prayer. The end is where we start from. This 'end' refers to the insight that all our endeavours as Christians should be attentive to the dignity of the human made in the image of God whose origin and end is in God. It also refers to crisis as a time not only of endings but of new beginnings, an end which calls us to new visions, new possibilities, new ways of being in the world. But before and beyond all this, we need to be people whose whole lives are offered up as a living prayer to God, who begin and end in prayer. Prayer is much more than what we do when we pray. It's the opening up of our lives in such a way that we become channels of grace in the world – imperfect, muddled, clouded channels to be sure, but still, prayer is that form of obedience which allows the ego, the self, the 'I', to step aside in order to let the otherness of God speak through and beyond the self that I am. This is a lifetime's work, and our death will always catch us in the midst of an incomplete and incompletable project of perfection. It calls us to be ever attentive to the mystery and beauty of God revealed in creation and in our fellow human beings, ever mindful of the luminosity which pervades our material world, ever willing to ask anew what it means to say it is not I but Christ who lives in me.

This means as Christians that we need to rediscover the sacramental imagination. It means recognizing in the environmental crisis a call to awaken to a new relationship with the earth and its creatures – and this is of course by no means unrelated to the economic crisis. How insane is it that, on the same day that our financial institutions went into meltdown, we learned that BAA have been given government permission for another 23,000 flights a year into Stansted airport? Our politicians have been bad stewards of the economy, and they are bad stewards of the environment too. Just as they woke up far, far too late to the implications of an unregulated financial system, when will they wake up to the implications of unregulated economic growth and its devastating impact on our planet? Gordon Brown might, just might, have acted to avert a major financial crisis, but no politician will be able to stand Canute-like against the rising tides of global warming.

Amor mundi. Contemptus mundi. Our world is not other than us. It participates in all our visions and failures, all our good intentions and all our misguided achievements. We are graced creatures of a graced creation, and we are sinful creatures who have sinned against creation.

With our violent and divided Christian history, we have sacrificed this nuanced sacramental imagination for a more repressive and fearful image of God. In Protestantism, this has taken the form of an excessive emphasis on the Word at the expense of sacramentality, and an exaggerated understanding of the effects of sin so that we view the whole of nature, including our own human nature, through a vision clouded by anxiety about sin, fallenness and desire. In Catholicism, it has taken the form of a constipated sacramentality, not a sacramentality of life but an institutionalised and formulaic interpretation of the sacraments which are far more about exclusion than inclusion, far more about policing the boundaries of the church than about welcoming the stranger and the pilgrim to the eucharistic feast. Our eucharist should be

open to all of creation, and most certainly to every human being who hungers and thirsts for God.

But also, if we are to have a rich sacramentality of creation, then this must be nurtured and sustained by our forms of communal worship. As a Roman Catholic woman I see in the Anglican communion the coming into being of a new sacramental vision through the symbolic presence of the woman priest. A few years ago I was on a panel alongside Archbishop Rowan Williams and Cardinal Walter Kasper. Somebody asked me a question about women's ordination, and I said that I thought the Anglican Church was prophetic in its ordination of women, but that it lacked a coherent theology for doing so. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, had a coherent theology which would allow for the ordination of women, but it had closed its mind to the prophetic gesture. Well, you can't please all of the people all of the time. Walter Kaspar objected to my calling the Anglicans prophetic, and Rowan Williams objected to my saying that the Anglicans didn't have a theology of priesthood. Nevertheless, I stand my ground on both those points, and at this point let me digress a little to explain what I mean.

A few years ago when I was teaching at Wesley College in Bristol, a woman training for the Anglican priesthood wanted to do her Masters dissertation on the eucharistic significance of women's blood. Her tutor went into mild panic mode and suggested he had better contact me and ask if I'd be willing to supervise it. Her name was Alison Green – some of you may remember her from her time here – and she has since gone on to do a PhD on the same subject, supervised by me, which she completed successfully last year. It's soon to be published by SPCK under the title, *The Bride, The Priest and the Whore: towards a theology of woman's priesthood*. With a title like that, I probably don't need to tell you to look out for it in the bookshops.

When the first generation of Anglican women priests was ordained, a survey conducted by Helen Thorne suggested that many of them experienced intense difficulties, sometimes because of hostility to their ordination, sometimes because of the expectations put upon them. (Unlike earlier generations of priests whose wives were assumed to be part and parcel of the ministerial package, women priests often lack domestic support and have to juggle considerable demands between parish and domestic duties). The first women priests were generally reluctant to associate themselves with feminism – the struggle for ordination had meant a degree of conformity which was not conducive to radical theological reflection. But the second generation of women priests may be more daring in its questions, more expressive in its sacramental representations. Alison is not the only woman priest I know who has written her doctorate on the changing symbols and sacraments of Christian ministry when performed by a woman priest. Through this opening up of liturgical life to a body which represents the maternal aspect of God, to the fertility as well as the sacrifice of love, to the joyful truth of God incarnate in every human being, whatever their sex, race, ability, orientation, to the rediscovery of desire, not as an enemy to be overcome but as a source of wisdom to be channeled and understood in the service of God and of one another as together we seek God's kingdom on earth, we might discover a community of Christians aglow with the life of Christ, in our worship and in our practices and institutions. I'm suggesting that the woman priest who consciously embodies the difference and diversity of Christ in her

performance of the sacraments, opens our sacramental imagination to new possibilities of being and becoming in Christ. And in order for Alison Green to explore this possibility, she had to draw on Roman Catholic theologies of priesthood, and her own Anglican experience of ordination – in spite of what Rowan Williams and Walter Kasper said!

Let me conclude. We live in times which call us to a radical rediscovery of our Christian vocation. Politically, this is a vocation to respond to the challenge of the times with a kenotic theology which positions us in the midst of the mess, with a voice that speaks of justice but not necessarily of God, for it is a voice which arises out of the humanity of Christ incarnate within the humanity of the suffering, excluded and impoverished victim. But in our worship, we can and must speak, not of God but to God, and we must listen with a receptive, bodily attentiveness to the expression of God in the material world, to the goodness of God in creation, for therein lies our hope and our salvation – in a world made new in Christ. This is a form of worship which is crystallised in our liturgical and communal worship, but which is also the light through which we see the world, so that however dark, however difficult the situation, we see the shimmer of grace in all that is.