

Archbishop of York's presidential address to the General Synod

Theme: Epieikes and Epieikeia: More Than Justice

By the Archbishop of York, Dr. John Sentamu
Saturday, July 08, 2006

ENS [Episcopal News Service] O God, who said "Let light shine out of darkness", shine in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of your glory in the face of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

"Let your gracious magnanimity be manifest to all. The Lord is near." (Philippians 4:5)

The Greek word (epieikes) which we translate as moderation is one of the most untranslatable of all Greek words. It occurs five times in the Epistles and its noun, (epieikeia), gentleness, graciousness (in Acts 24:4, 2 Corinthians 10:1) twice.

In 1 Timothy 3:3 it's translated as "lenient"; in Titus 3:2 "conciliatory", in James 3:17 "forbearing"; and in 1 Peter 2:18, "reasonableness."

The apostle Paul is saying to his Phillipian friends: "Let your moderation, patient mind, softness, magnanimity, gentleness, graciousness, forbearing spirit be known to all. The Lord is at hand.

Put differently, "Let all the world know that you will meet a person half-way.

This reminds me of a story about a cobra that goes to a saint and says, "Please give me a rule of life so that I can be more spiritual and saintly like you. People love you but are totally terrified of me. When they see me, if they have a chance, they kill me at once."

The Saint says, "Well, first of all, don't bite people anymore."

So, the cobra goes back down the mountain happy that the saint has accepted him as a student, and he sits by the village path all day long, thinking over the saint's advice.

But after a couple of days, people begin to notice him, and since he's sitting so still and looks so happy, the people get curious. After a few more days, unafraid of the cobra by now, some of the children have started poking him with sticks and teasing him, throwing pebbles at him, kicking dirt on his head. A few cruel adults too, toss garbage on him and kick him when they walk by him. After about a week, the saint walks down the village path and sees the poor cobra sitting there all bruised and bloody and full of mud. The saint says, "My God, what's happened to you?" The cobra replies, "I was just following your instructions, master; I don't bite people anymore." Realising all that had happened, the saint looks down lovingly at the cobra and says, "But I didn't tell you not to hiss!"

Gracious magnanimity isn't mere passivity amidst numerous difficulties but an opportunity for a positive engagement of love. It isn't toughness gone soft - as a Yiddish proverb says, "If you can't bite, don't show your teeth."

You will know a jumbo jet that developed serious engine trouble in mid-Atlantic. The captain told the passengers and asked them permission to open the hold and dump all their luggage in the ocean. "Yes, yes, yes", they all cried. It was done.

Thirty minutes later the captain said, "We are still losing altitude. We must get rid of all your hand luggage. The cabin crew will collect them and when we have dropped to a safer height they will throw them out." "But of course", the cries went out. And it was done.

An hour later the captain said, "We still need to lose more weight. Fifty people will be safely dropped into the water with their life-jackets. This airline operates an Inclusive Equal Opportunities Policy. And we shall now put it into operation. We shall use the alphabet to guide us.

A – are there any Africans on board? Silence.

B – are there any Blacks on board? Silence.

C – are there any Caribbeans on board? Silence.

A little black boy turned to his father and said, "Dad, what are we?" The father replied, "We are Zulus!"

Gracious magnanimity isn't toughness gone soft, or mere passivity amidst difficulties. It's wisdom's first step: knowing what is false. Being 'wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matthew 10: 16b)

Long before the New Testament used the word gracious-magnanimity, this word had a great record in Greek ethical writing.

The meaning behind it is this: it expresses that "gracious magnanimity or moderation" which recognises the impossibility that cleaves to formal law. Is the word that recognises that there are occasions when a "legal" right can become a "moral" wrong.

Aristotle discussed gracious-magnanimity (*epieikeia*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

He says that gracious magnanimity (*epieikeia*) is that which is just and sometimes that which is better than justice. (*Eth. Nic V 10.6*).

He says that gracious magnanimity (*epieikeia*) is that which corrects the law when the law is deficient because of its generality. He compares the person who is graciously magnanimous (*epieikes*) with the person who is immoderate (*akribodikaios*).

The person who is immoderate (*akribodikaios*) is the person who stands up for the last title of their legal rights; but the person who is graciously magnanimous (*epieikes*) knows that there are times when a thing may be legally completely justified and yet morally completely wrong. The person who is forbearing (*epieikes*) knows when to relax the law under the compulsion of a force that is higher and greater than law. They know the time when to stand on their rights would unquestionably be legal, and would just as unquestionably be completely unchristian.

Similarly, a graciously magnanimous Church has a responsibility to both affirm moral standards and to

ensure that its rules don't seem rigorous to the point of inhumanity.

The Greeks themselves explained this word gracious magnanimity (epieikes) as "justice and something better than justice." They said that gracious-magnanimity (epieikeia) ought to come in when strict justice became unjust because of its generality. There may be individual instances where a perfectly just law becomes unjust or where justice isn't the same thing as equity.

A person has the quality of gracious-magnanimity (epieikeia) if they know when not to apply the strict letter of the law, when to relax justice and introduce mercy. Lord Denning was very good at this. He never saw himself as a mere interpreter of the law. But as both interpreter and maker of the law in his judgements; which infuriated both governments and barristers.

How should justice be relaxed and mercy introduced when applying the strict letter of the law would be perfectly just but result in injustice?

Let us take a simple example which meets every teacher almost every day. Here are two students. We correct their examination papers. We apply justice and find that one has 80 per cent and the other 50 per cent. But we go a little further and find that the student who got 80 percent has been able to do their work in ideal conditions with books, leisure and peace to study, while the student who got 50 per cent is from a poor home and has inadequate equipment, or has been ill, or has recently come through some time of sorrow or strain. In justice this low achieving student deserves 50 per cent and no more; but gracious magnanimity will value their paper far higher than that and would commend the student for a scholarship.

Gracious magnanimity is the quality of the person who knows that regulations are not the last word and knows when not to apply the letter of the law. A church meeting may sit with the book of practice and procedure on the table in front of it and take every one of its decisions in strict accordance with the law of the Church; but there are times when the Christian treatment of some situation demands that the book of practice and procedure should not be regarded as the last word.

God of mercy! Didn't the 75th General Convention of the Episcopal Church need this! A Convention which was full of life, fun and joy in the Lord, with uplifting worship and Bible studies. A Convention which clearly demonstrated that the Episcopal Church is committed to mission, to the Anglican Communion, and to the Archbishop of Canterbury. A Church that takes the Millennium Development Goals seriously. Poverty, world peace, HIV/AIDS, the living wage, young people, equality for all, are at the top of the agenda.

And yet in spite of the hard work of the Legislative Committee, and its numerous hearings, the Convention failed to meet the precise request of Windsor. It left too much room for doubt and didn't stop the rumour and impression of doing 'our own thing'.

Nine days at the Convention taught me that this rumour and impression unfairly tarnishes all Episcopalians with a kind of arrogance which the present US administration displays through many of its actions. But it's true to say that Oneness in thought and life is trumped by so-called democratic processes and thereby weakens the Church's oneness and witness in Christ.

The Legislative Committee took the recommendations and invitation of the Windsor Report seriously. But the Convention's legislative processes – modelled on the House of Representatives and the Senate, and acting like them – are not fit for the purpose of engendering good conversation (which comes from the same root word in Latin as conversion) and in the end they fell short. As Don Curran, a delegate from Central Florida said: "We have been asked to build a bridge. The bridge is one thousand feet long. If the bridge is only 950 feet long, it does not work. It's useless."

It is impossible to be graciously-magnanimous when the book of practice and procedures is regarded as the last word.

If only the Convention has heeded the wisdom of Rev. John Danforth, an Episcopalian priest and former Senator and US Ambassador to the United Nations. In a public lecture he said, "Sexuality is the most divisive issue. The Episcopal Church needs to remember that 99 percent of Americans are not Episcopalians. Sexual Orientation must not be the centrepiece of the Episcopal Church. We have a higher calling, a more central message: that God was in Christ, was in the world, reconciling the world to himself. And he has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation."

He urged his audience to look to Christ and be reconciled. "Articulate reconciliation; roll it out; act it out. Stay with the message – and it is long-term. If we can't be united and if we offer a broken Church, this is a broken answer to a broken world. A broken Church is a sad Church. Don't build a mortuary before it is necessary. Shift from the divisive issue of sexuality to ministry of reconciliation."

Danforth wasn't downplaying "Issues in Human Sexuality". Nor do I. It's a challenge that won't go away. Personally, I take an orthodox view on 'Issues.'

The word 'orthodoxy' from Greek, means teaching what is right and true; and in Christian tradition, this leads to glorification – 'being changed from glory to glory' – it is transformative. That is why I am persuaded that our sexual affections can no more define who we are than our tribe, ethnicity or nationality. At the deepest ontological level, therefore, there is no such thing as 'a homosexual' or a 'heterosexual'; there are human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation. "In Christ" – and in Him alone – "we know both God and human nature as they truly are"; and so in Christ alone we know ourselves as we truly are. There can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality in Christ. Human sexuality must, therefore, be understood and talked about in the context of the reality in Christ.(1)

What is paramount for me are the words of the Apostle Paul, that, "I resolved to know nothing (while I was with you) but Jesus Christ, and him crucified". My motivation too in relationship to all those I meet is to seek nothing but Christ crucified among them. And so in my ministry I have learned to befriend, hear and listen to those who describe themselves as Gay or Lesbian. They, like me, are called to redeemed humanity in Christ. I strongly believe that holy communication is part of Holy Communion.

I am driven to exasperation when Christians don't disagree well and Christianly. The Christian, as St Paul sees it, is the person who knows that there is something beyond justice. When the woman taken in adultery was brought before him, Jesus could have applied the letter of the Law according to which she

should have been stoned to death; but he went beyond justice. As far as justice goes, there isn't one of us who deserves anything other than the condemnation of God, but he goes far beyond justice. St Paul lays it down that the mark of a Christian in their personal relationships with their fellow human beings must be that they know when to insist on justice and when to remember that there is something beyond justice.

Why should a person be like this? Why should they have this joy and gracious gentleness in their life? Because, says St Paul, the Lord is at hand. If we remember the coming triumph of Christ, we can never lose our hope and our joy.

If we remember and life is short, we will not wish to enforce the stern justice which so often divides people, but will wish to deal with people in love, as we hope that God will deal with us. Justice is human, but gracious-magnanimity is divine.

"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; this is the Law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12). Sadly it is often a case of "Do it to others before they do it to you."

And so, the basic and the fundamental things about gracious magnanimity is that it goes back to God. If God stood on his rights, if God applied to us nothing but the rigid standards of law, where would we be? God is the supreme example of one who is graciously-magnanimous (*epieikes*) and who deals with others with gracious magnanimity (*epieikeia*).

It may be hard to translate this word, but it isn't hard to see the clamant need of the quality which it describes. We live in a society where people insist on standing on their legal rights, where they will only do what they are compelled to do, and where they desire to make others do all that they can compel them to do. And yet the heart of any human right is the right to do that which we ought to do, and not simply getting that which we believe we are entitled to.

Again and again, we have seen congregations torn by strife and reduced to tragic unhappiness because men and women and committees and courts stood on the letter of the law. When a congregation's governing body meets with a copy of its church's book of law, prominently displayed on the table, trouble is never far away. A new world would arise in society and in the Church if all of us ceased to base our actions purely on law and legal rights and prayed to God to give us gracious-magnanimity.

In a brilliant essay, "Imitatio and Ethics in Judaism and Christianity," Professor Raphael Loewe, formerly Goldsmid Professor of Hebrew at University College London, says that "The whole concept of human rights is one that is alien to rabbinic jurisprudence ... all humankind are the reciprocal beneficiaries of the duties, which each individual owes to God.

It is mercy, loving kindness and reciprocal solidarity, which binds together, at the level of both individual and group, superior to inferior, advantaged to disadvantaged, man to God and God to man. It prevents either self-discipline or social responsibility from being ignored. It is walking in all God's ways. Deed of mutual charity. It is the cultivation of submissiveness to the divine will, and praying, 'Subdue thou our self-assertive drive, to enslave itself to thee.' For the Torah is a golfing-umberella, not an infinitely extensible bus shelter,"

This freshness of thought may help us to get out of the quagmire of Human Rights debate. These are the core-values of true citizenship. Values which were the building blocks that gave nationhood to this nation through the medicine of the Gospel. "Reinventing the wheel isn't the problem; it is reinventing the flat tyre that is the killer."

What we need is loving our neighbour as we love ourselves. Rebuilding our nation by what we give and not what we demand; active participation, and not claiming our rights and blaming someone else (BSE)!

We all need to hear again and take to heart that greatest short story in then world.

The story of the loving father, told by Jesus in Luke 15:11-32. It should never have been called the parable of the Prodigal Son, for the son isn't the hero. It should be called the parable of the Loving Father, for it tells us rather about a father's love than a son's sin.

It's true the young son had said, "Give me now the part of the estate that I will get anyway when you are dead and let me get out of this." The father granted his request; and without delay the son realised his assets and left home, and squandered it all. But remember, in the far country he came to himself.

Jesus didn't believe in total depravity. He didn't believe in glorifying God by diminishing humankind. He also believed that we aren't ever essentially ourselves until we come home to God.

This parable of the Loving Father tells us much about the forgiveness of God; and how we should forgive. The father had been waiting and watching for the son to come home, for he saw him a long way off. When he came, he forgave him with no recrimination. There is a way of forgiving, when forgiveness is conferred as a favour. It's even worse, when someone is forgiven, but always by hint and by word and by threat, his sin is held over him.

Once, Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat rebellious Southerners when they had finally been defeated and had returned to the Union of the United States. The questioner expected that Lincoln would take a dire vengeance, but he answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away". It's the wonder of the love of God that he treats us like that.

But that isn't the end of the story. There enters the elder brother who is actually sorry that his brother had come home. He stands for the self-righteous, religious person who would rather see a sinner destroyed than saved.

His attitude shows that his years of obedience to his father had been years of grim duty and not of loving service. He lacks sympathy, referring to the wanderer, not as my brother, but as your son. A sort of self-righteous person who would cheerfully kick a person further into the gutter when they were already down. He also had a peculiarly nasty mind. There is no mention of prostitutes until he mentions them. He, no doubt, suspected his brother of the sins he himself would have liked to commit.

What a contrast to the Loving Father. It's easier to confess to Him. He is merciful in His judgements. His love is broader than human love. He always forgives and forgets.

That kind of redeeming and restorative love should inform all our actions as the Body of Christ, allowing God's transformative power into situations which only know fear, anger and revenge. Let this gracious magnanimity inform the debate on prisons, crime and punishment. Isn't the purpose of punishment, penitence? When people are sent to prison, is the intended outcome one of reforming the individual, deterring behaviour, or for administering punishment to fit the crime?

The clamour to build more and more prisons and detention centres is doomed to failure. Seeking society's revenge through punishment brings no lasting solution. The idea of moral desserts underlies our right to deter and reform. Restorative justice for the perpetrator and the victim offers a more hopeful way forward for the whole community.

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25, Jesus was telling his disciples that if you want to meet God face to face, the nearest you are going to come to it on this planet is to look into the faces of your brothers and sisters – and especially your sisters and brothers who have been declared unrighteous, unclean, unacceptable.

It is not that we find God there; it is God finds us there.

That is where our faith is nurtured and bears fruit. There, where we expect to meet monsters, we meet God instead. The opportunity to serve God lies there among the prisoners who have been reckoned to be least deserving of any service at all.

"Let your gracious magnanimity be known to all. The Lord is near." And in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. Life, which is the very life of God, and light, which puts chaos to flight, reveals all things for what they are, and is a guiding light. And this is the real joy to the world. "In him was life and the life was the light of all people." (John 1:4)

It's this life and light which we need in a world filled with fear and hatred; a world which is so dangerous that it led one boy to pray, "Our Father, Watch Out in heaven. Harold be thy name." (Harold was the name of the local police officer.)

This life and light has the power to turn anger into hope. Fear of the other into respect. Rejection into glory.

As we seek as a nation to address the evil of anyone who would wish to maim and kill others by suicide bombing, we need a three-pronged approach.

First, to create neighbourhoods that are flourishing, safe, clean and generous. As well as tackling what would-be bombers believe to be their grievances and causes.

Secondly, to wake up to the truth that those who master-mind the terrorists' networks are brilliant in inspiring those who come to their cause by giving them a vision which tragically is used solely for evil ends.

Thirdly, the only way to overcome terrorism is to out-imagine it. (As the SAS motto says – 'He who

dares wins!' That is – out-imagine your enemy.)

Offering a vision of wholeness in a compelling and imaginative way that is so persuasive that would-be bombers would come to see this as their own vision. A vision that would turn them from outsiders, self-excluding and deluded despisers of others, into belongers; a vision which will help them to see that those they seek to destroy are their own brothers and sisters regardless of their religious affiliations. The way to do this is by drawing a large enough circle of love which includes them and us.

Relying on the security services alone won't do it.

Trust in tough laws alone won't do it.

Revenge and the desire to banish them to another island won't do it.

Together, we can out-imagine, out-plan and out-think would-be bombers and turn would-be enemies into friends by building an inclusive circle of love. On our own we can't get it together. Together we can get it.

And the vocation of the Church of England is this. As Michael Ramsay said in 'The Gospel and the Catholic Church,' the centre of Anglicanism, her primary vocation, is to witness to the perpetual passion of Christ's body which must lead, according to the divine providence, into the heart of the gospel. Proper penitence and a readiness to go willingly, and perhaps be lifted up, to suffer whatever sacrifices may be necessary for the visible unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

For this to happen we must die in order to bear fruit and be messengers of God's redeeming love. We are called to die to the values of the world - the greed for wealth, status and power; as well as our psychological tendencies: our desires and compulsions for success, to be loved, to be held in esteem, to be acclaimed by those in our group, to have power and control over others. It's a call to disarm ourselves, to die to our plans and let God's plans and ways take hold of us.

I have come to believe that when I shall come face to face with the Wounded Healer who bears the marks of love, he will ask me "Sentamu, where are your tears for me to wipe away? Where are your wounds of love received through loving and laying down your life for me and my brothers and sisters – the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick prisoner?"

Secondly, if we are gracious and magnanimous, our vocation - while never pitching our tent in the valley of relativism – is to see everyone in England, people of faith and none, not as enemies but as beloved neighbours and friends. All made in the image and likeness of God. A God who is Christ-like.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin is, for me, a great interpreter of the three things we must say about Christ and salvation today in England; how we relate Christianity to an England that has other faiths present. He says we must be:

1. "Exclusive in the sense of affirming the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ, but not in the sense of denying the possibility of salvation to those outside the Christian faith.
2. Inclusive in the sense of refusing to limit the saving grace of God to Christians, but not in the sense of viewing other religions as salvific.



3. Pluralist in the sense of acknowledging the gracious work of God in the lives of all human beings, but not in the sense of denying the unique and decisive nature of what God has done in Jesus Christ."¹

It's from the Cross that the light of God's love shines forth upon the world in its fullest splendour.

"Let your gracious magnanimity be manifest to all. The Lord is near."

Thank you.

¹ L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* Eerdmans, 1989, pp182,183

 [PRINTER](#)
[FRIENDLY](#)
 [SEND TO A](#)
[FRIEND](#)