FAITH AS A RADICAL ETHIC OF POLITICAL RECONCILIATION!

It is an honour to be asked to present the Dennis Cooke Memorial Lecture. I am grateful to Joan and her family for the privilege. It is telling that it should be a reconciliation lecture because it was an initiative by Dennis that set the Edgehill Reconciliation Programme in motion. Only the bane of all our lives, funding or its cessation, brought the programme to an end. I share the frustration and loss of the programme, because I had the same experience with an Education for Reconciliation programme, which I directed for sixteen years, coming to an end for similar reasons. This lecture acknowledges and honours Dennis’ role in the effective Edgehill Reconciliation Programme.

I am also privileged to give this lecture because there is a small but meaningful personal link. My early years owe much to Glastry Methodist Church. During my teenage years Henry Cooke, the father of Dennis, was my minister. Henry later took me through my local preachers examinations and early preparation for candidature for ministry. In my early teens Dennis was a student at Edgehill and on some weekends he came to Glastry. When he did, his father would ask him to take the Sunday morning young peoples’ bible class. Now Henry used to talk to us for about an hour, but Cooke the younger, would try to hold a discussion, ‘Now what do you think about that?’ or ‘Why do you think Jesus acted as he did?’ Well, we were country kids and it was like pulling hens teeth. Poor Dennis tried, but we didn’t think about much then except the opposite sex and football, and Dennis disappointingly never ventured there. But maybe Dennis’ discussion style rather than monologue sowed a seed, and my very occasional one-liners in response to him developed later into an inability to stop talking! It is a personal connection, which I remember with gratitude, and it adds to my sense of privilege this evening.
So what about faith and a radical ethic of political reconciliation? In all our churches in Ireland we have difficulties with this and we struggle with it. The heart of our difficulty, and I oversimplify here, is that we are strong on vertical reconciliation but not so good on horizontal reconciliation. We can sing, preach and pray about private and personal reconciliation with God, but don’t really know what to do with reconciliation in the political, public, social life of our country. And those who don’t think that faith or church should have anything much to do, if at all, with reconciliation in the political, public and social spheres, may not have much of an idea about reconciliation either. In South Africa Desmond Tutu was criticized for bringing forgiveness into the foreground of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and so he was setting the bar too high. The bar was supposed to be set at peaceful coexistence, levels of civility and respect for contracts. We seem to have settled in Northern Ireland for a kind of benign apartheid and a political sectarian duopoly in governance. Whither reconciliation?

As people of faith we do struggle with reconciliation in the political, public and social arenas. We have repeated to ourselves for so long that we believe it to be the Gospel that until the person is reconciled to God there can be no reconciliation in society. Is God confined within modernist, European Enlightenment individualism? Our difficulty is that despite a 20th century of mass, industrialized killing and a century of Irish violence and killing, we have not worked out a theological praxis of social reconciliation. Individuals have reached for it but not our religious institutions.

And this is not just an Irish weakness. Scan around the conflict regions of the world, where practically all of them had or have a religious dimension, there is a patchwork quilt of good and bad reconciliation
praxis. Daniel Philpott, professor of Political Science and Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame has pointed to both sides of the equation.

_Prelates and pastors, imans and rabbis have brought distinctive, insistent, hefty, and authoritative voices to political debates about the past in Chile, Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador, Timor-Leste, Germany, Iraq, Afghanistan, Morocco, Sierra Leone, Poland, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, the Czech Republic, South Africa and other countries._

This list includes a Catholic Lay Association in Rome, which negotiated an end to the decade-long civil war in Mozambique in 1992. They have since been called to negotiate settlements in Kosovo, Algeria, Guatemala, Uganda, Burundi and Liberia. That’s the good news story. There is a bad news story of militant religion, colluding with violence and division. In Rwanda, the Catholic and Anglican churches were too closely linked to the postcolonial Hutu regime and did little to stop the 1994 genocide. Philpott has a litany of religious failure.

_A similar dynamic of collaboration with the state, consensual or forced, and a consequentially weak influence on the politics of the past describes churches in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Greece, Ukraine and Russia._

The point in that religious involvement in the politics of the past, in violence and reconciliation and peacebuilding is global, because religion is global for good and ill, and where it is the latter, theology and belief systems are usually skewed, and that includes being skewed through pietism, quietism, privatism and passivism. If religion is legitimizing violence or war, if it is in collusion with unjust arrangements of power, even through silence and supposed neutrality, if religion breeds disrespect, sows seeds of prejudice, division and discord, if religion is sectarian or racist, then it cannot act as a reconciling force. The root
meaning of the Latin word for religion means ‘to reconnect’, ‘to bind together’. Sometimes religion does not do that. But at its best, it has a power and energy within that can reconnect people, communities and nations, bind together and reconcile. It begs the question; is religion fit for reconciliation? Very specifically, is religion in Ireland fit for reconciliation? Even more specifically, given who many of us are and where we are and who this lecture honours, is Irish Methodism fit for reconciliation?

**Primary Sources of Reconciliation**

Reconciliation is being in right relation. More accurately, it is a process of restoring relationships. The Hebrew Bible is one of our primary sources and though it does not use the word reconciliation, it offers a cluster of relational words, which provide us with an ethic of reconciliation. Clustered together in the Hebrew Bible, and therefore indivisible are justice, righteousness, mercy and peace. These are the core thought forms that shape a Jewish ethic of reconciliation, and we remind ourselves that our Christian faith has Jewish roots. We will engage those Jewish roots again when we explore the key reconciliation text from the Christian Testament.

In the Hebrew Bible two of the words are interchangeable, justice and righteousness. The great Jewish scholar of the 20th century, Abraham Heschel, has said that, ‘It is exceedingly difficult to establish the exact difference in meaning of the biblical terms Misphat, justice, and Tsedakah, righteousness… However it seems that justice is a mode of action, righteousness a quality of the person’.³ Justice is what we do, righteousness is the quality of who we are in relationship. Heschel again points out that justice also implies the ability to discern between good and evil. Justice is an interpersonal relationship in defiance of self-interest and which is both a claim on us, and a responsibility. Even with deep community divisions,
we are united under the claims and responsibilities of justice. *Mishpat* is an interpersonal relationship invoking claim and responsibility, rights and duties. In the Hebrew Bible, without justice there are no true relationships between human beings, and between humans and God. There is also a paradoxical bias in justice. In Heschel’s great book on *The Prophets*, he goes to the heart of the Hebrew prophetic tradition.

*Justice was not equal justice but a bias in favour of the poor. Justice always leaned towards mercy for the widows and the orphans. Divine justice involves His (sic) being merciful, compassionate.*

Here is an intricate and integrated ethic of reconciliation. Hebrew uses this cluster of words to get to the heart of justice. So Heschel again,

*Justice dies when dehumanized, no matter how exactly it may be exercised. Justice dies when deified, for beyond all justice is God’s compassion. The logic may seem impersonal, yet the concern for justice is an act of love.*

Interchangeable with justice is righteousness. In the Hebrew Bible this word has to do with right relationships. It is the central word for all relationships, for relationships between humans, relationships with the animal world and with the natural environment, with the whole community of life. And it is the core word for the relationships between God and all of God’s creation. Righteousness is right relations based on justice and is the Hebrew ethical reminder that there are no right or good community relations without justice. To live righteously, which sounds too religious but is anything but, is to fulfill responsibilities and duties towards others, animals and environment. It is to put right the injuries of those hurting and wounded. To quote Heschel, again, ‘righteousness is associated with a burning compassion for the oppressed’.

This is why in the Hebrew Bible, justice and righteousness refer to political and social
justice. The Hebrew Bible was not the product of modernist, European Enlightenment, individualistic culture. To read it that way, as we often have, is to misread and distort it. The Christian Testament also is essentially relational, social and political in the emphasis on justice. The Hebrew Bible is talking social justice and social and political relationships based on social justice. And that relational and social justice leans intentionally towards the suffering, the oppressed, vulnerable and weak of society. Which is why the cluster words include kindness and mercy or compassion, and liberty, the setting free of those trapped in a past, in poverty, debt or slavery. Justice and righteousness are frequently restorative, putting right the plight of the poor and dispossessed, ensuring the rights of the vulnerable and alienated, liberating people from violence and imprisonment in whatever past, and restoring humanity and community.

Justice and right relations based on justice have mercy at the heart. Hebrew needs two words to convey this. The first word, Chesed, means ‘steady love’, the commitment of love that refuses to let go. It is standing alongside the other, suffering with the other and commitment to restoring the other. The second word, Rahamim, is a feminine image related to the word for womb. The womb-like love of a mother who will never give up loving her children and the willingness to forgive. The high water mark of Hebrew ethics of reconciliation is in the prophet Micah.

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness (or mercy), and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6 v 8)*

It is not surprising that all of this adds up to peace, Shalom. Justice, which is political and social, intensely relational, lean-to justice, restoring relationships across the community of life based on social and restorative
justice, is Shalom. And ‘the peace expressed in shalom encompasses far more than the absence of war. Shalom means wholeness, righteousness, justice, grace and truth; thus all the ethical values are found within shalom’.7

This is the ethic of reconciliation found in the Hebrew Bible, an ethic that holds together justice, right relations, mercy and peace, and which includes restoration and liberation. It is also the ethic that underpins the Christian Testament, which brings us to Paul’s theo-praxis of reconciliation.

When we tap into the primary sources for reconciliation in the Christian Testament, Paul is the key practitioner, especially in II Corinthians 5. Paul’s Letter to the Romans is considered his most theological letter, but it was a Lutheran bishop, Krister Stendal, who helped us to see that our Lutheran reading of Romans was much too introspective. By mid-20th century there had been set in motion a re-reading of Romans, new direction in Pauline studies that recovered not only Paul’s Jewishness, but how much he was centered on the core Hebrew idea of social justice, the core notion and praxis of the Hebrew Bible, and how that coloured his language in Romans 5 on justification. We now recognise what Martin Luther failed to recognise that Paul’s Greek vocabulary in Romans 5 was a translation of the Hebrew language and pattern of Hebrew words, justice and righteousness. New Zealand theologian, Chris Marshall, has drawn attention to a whole family of Greek words that not only follow the pattern of the Hebrew words, but also translate into English as just, justice and justify.8 What this means then is that in the Christian Testament the restoration of right relationships is about the restoration of justice. And Paul’s letter to the Romans makes the very explicit link between justification as restoring right relationships based on justice and reconciliation, a word he also uses in Romans 5. So Romans 5 and justification by faith which was a battlefield in the 16th century between Protestants and Catholics and which led to the brutal 30 years war, was
always a text about social justice and reconciliation. Maybe with 2017 coming up and the 500th anniversary of the Reformations, instead of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland still arguing over 16th century questions, we will re-read Romans as a key reconciliation source, recover Paul on fire for the justice of God as crucial to restored, reconciled and reconciling relationships.

In the Christian Testament, reconciliation is primarily Paul’s word and II Corinthians 5 is a key text. Corinth was a city, which was deeply divided because of its history. The Roman imperial power destroyed it in 146 BCE and then rebuilt it a century later, populating it with immigrants, entrepreneurs, military veterans and freed slaves. Class stratification and ethnic divisions were rife and deep. Corinth was a city that desperately needed reconciliation. The problem at the heart of the Corinthian house churches was that they simply mirrored the larger society. The problems of the community were the problems in the faith community. They had the same divisions and the same tensions and conflicts. Paul is struggling to reconcile a deeply divided faith community, which is no different from the rest of Corinthian society. They think they are premier league Christians. Paul is not so sure and so the litmus test for the faith community is reconciliation and whether or not they are modeling and engaging a ‘ministry of reconciliation’. Paul was really challenging this faith community in the context of the divided, conflictual Roman city as to whether they were fit for reconciliation. Was all their high-powered spiritual life fit for reconciliation? Again Paul is not so sure, but he is pastoral and he spells out for them a vision of reconciliation and what a praxis of reconciliation looks like.

Twice in II Corinthians 8 v 13 Paul calls for equality. He invokes the manna story of Exodus 16 and he challenges the Corinthian Christians to be involved in international economic mutual aid, not as charity, but as a fundamental justice issue. Reconciliation is a challenge within the house.
churches, a ministry or service to the wider socio-economic and political community at Corinth, and international economic solidarity with suffering, oppressed people in the wider world. Paul is not going to pander to their high-octane spirituality. When he writes to Corinth on reconciliation, he is concrete and earthed in the socio-economic realities of divisions and inequalities.

It is not therefore accidental that Paul’s word for reconciliation is an economic word. It’s a Greek word found some fifteen times in the Christian Testament and it means to exchange, to give and take. In the Greek world it meant ‘an exchange of money to establish an equivalence of value’.10

Accountants and auditors as well as bankers still speak of reconciling bank statements or accounts. Paul makes frequent use of economic vocabulary in this Corinthian letter, especially in chapters 5, 8 and 9. The Jewish context of his thought is in the Jubilee tradition, every seventh and forty-ninth year release from debt, ensuring that there would not be a permanent under-class. Paul’s theology of reconciliation in the Corinthian correspondence makes reconciliation and economic justice inseparable. Reconciliation is about socio-economic justice, and this is also consistent with his vision of reconciliation or justification in Romans.

Paul’s Greek word also means ‘the other’, with the thought of exchanging places with the other, or being in solidarity with the other rather than being against the other. In reconciliation, the other is perceived differently. Reconciliation means no longer looking at others from ‘a human point of view’. The older translation has ‘according to the flesh’ which in Western theology with its negative attitude towards the body and obsession with sexuality, has misunderstood Paul’s insight. What he says has nothing to do with sexuality or sexual passions, but a worldview. We are socialised into a worldview, a way of seeing everything. The human
point of view reflects the status quo, often majoritarian viewpoint. But reconciliation opens up a radically new perspective. We no longer view the other as the other but as being together in the community of life. There is a whole new creation in which we see people and nature differently. We are no longer driven or shaped by the domination system, which for Paul was Roman imperialism and its socio-economic disparities and elitist way of life. In a new creation we live in a world as though there are no social divisions and economic disparities. We live in resistance to this world and for the transformation of this world through the praxis of reconciliation. In the new creation we no longer live in a world where humans dominate nature and set ourselves over against nature, often in destructive ways. Reconciliation is becoming eco-friendly and living in partnership with the whole community of life. Reconciliation is not only about socio-economic justice, it is also about eco-justice.

At the heart of all this is divine gift. ‘All this is from God’, and ‘In Christ God was reconciling the world to Godself’. Paul’s central affirmation of faith is that ‘God was in Christ’. The reconciling initiative is God’s, God is the prime mover and takes the initiative in the justice-based reconciliation. The Jesus story is the story of divine movement into the heart of violence, division, exclusion, inequality and oppression. The imperial power and its domination system, which was all-pervasive in Corinth as it was in Galilee and Jerusalem, has made Jesus the victim of its imperial crucifixion. God is one with this victim of imperial crucifixion and this unmasks the violence, injustice and militarism of the empire and its domination system. Reconciliation is what God is about in the violent, unjust and innocent death of Jesus. Reconciliation absorbs the violence and injustice of the world and creates right relations based on non-violence, socio-economic and socio-ecological justice.

So you are ‘ambassadors for Christ’, representative and active for the reconciliation or restoration of relationships rooted in socio-economic and
socio-ecological justice. In a phrase Paul uses some ten times in his letters, we ‘become the justice of God’. Ambassadors for Christ are to facilitate this challenging and alternative social vision, not just in the church, but in the public square. Non-engagement is not an option for the faith community. Active for economic justice and eco-justice, that’s Paul’s litmus test as to whether a faith community is fit for reconciliation. And their only weapons are in II Corinthians 6v3-13, the ‘weapons of righteousness’, the non-violent action towards right relations based on economic and eco-justice.

Paul’s praxis of reconciliation is rooted in the ethic of reconciliation from his Hebrew scriptures. These are our primary sources, which shape our engagement and action for reconciliation in a deeply divided, conflictual and contested society such as Northern Ireland/Ireland.

**Faith and the Radical Ethic in the Public Square**

A radical ethic of reconciliation is an ethic of social and political reconciliation.

Daniel Philpott offers six practices that enact social and political reconciliation:

1. Building socially just institutions
2. Acknowledgement
3. Reparations
4. Apology
5. Punishment
6. Forgiveness

‘Each practice aims to achieve some measure of justice by redressing the direct wounds that political injustices inflict’.10
My own contribution to this was developed through the Education for Reconciliation community education programme, and has been further developed through recent conferences and lectures with students at the Border Peace School in Korea. It is a model of integrated reconciliation or integrated peacebuilding. There are six interrelated, indivisible, integrated strands that belong together in a way that suggests we cannot have one without the others. As with Philpott’s six practices, I simply list them, each prefaced with the word socio, to underline the social nature of each and to get away from the prevalent individualism that weakens and distorts reconciliation:

1. Socio-political
2. Socio-economic
3. Socio-ecological
4. Socio-legal – democracy, rule of law and human rights
5. Socio-psychological – cultural and political identities
6. Socio-spiritual – meaning, purpose and values.

All six strands belong together and any approach to reconciliation in the public square needs to be integrated or holistic. But let me pull it all together into three strands of practice that the faith community brings to the public square in relation to reconciliation.

- Reconciliation as social justice

Our primary sources are insistent on this. There is no reconciliation without social justice. At the heart of community, national and international conflicts, violence and divisions are injustices. These are abuses of power. Social and political systems and structures are excluding
groups on racial, ethnic, religious, or class grounds. There is no reconciliation unless injustices are redressed. There is no reconciliation unless people are brought into right relationships on the basis of social justice. This is why injustices are to be identified and named and then put right. This requires the building of socially just institutions. A reconciling society will need just laws and practices, just institutions guaranteed by the state and which will ensure human rights, participative democracy, the rule of law and a fair distribution of goods, resources and opportunities in which human flourishing is possible for all, and people can find meaning, purpose and values. And we remind ourselves that when our primary sources articulate an ethic of justice they lean especially towards the most vulnerable, weak, poor, marginalised and suffering members of society. Reconciliation is social justice and it is about the practice of social justice at every level of society, political economic, ecological, legal, cultural, educational and the core values at the heart of a society if it is to be reconciled. At every one of those levels there will be resistance and opposition. Whatever the resistance the faith community stays in the public square and insists on reconciliation with everyone based on social justice. This is both political and spiritual practice.

- **Reconciliation as the Re-ordering of Power Relations**

Justice is notoriously difficult to define. It’s one thing hungering and thirsting for justice, as one of the Beatitudes put it, but agreeing to what social justice is in relation to politics, economics, education or culture is much more difficult. To generalize, it’s a matter of historical observation that unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland have meant different things by justice. Also what justice means to Israelis is one thing. What justice means to Palestinians is something else. Or what justice means to those in power and what it means to those without power is very different. Those who hold power or who believe they have the right to
power will tend towards justice as law and order and security. The powerless and excluded from institutions and arrangements of power will look much more towards a more just and fairer distribution of power, resources and opportunities. Justice for those with power will prioritise punishment, while those without power or deprived of power will want to prioritise restorative justice.

Power and the structures and arrangements of power are crucial to the harmony or disharmony of a society. Where power lies and how power is used, especially political and economic power, will determine whether a society or a nation is violent or peaceful.

Whatever else justice is, it has everything to do with how power is organized, structured and arranged, political and economic power. Who rules, who is to rule, govern and how?

Democracy is the best bet we have for power equilibrium. Reconciliation as justice requires the re-ordering of power relations. Power differentials, especially unjust power differentials need to be re-dressed and the relationships of power put right. This means addressing power relations in politics, economics, legal systems, gender relations, racism, sectarianism, sexism, homophobia, all levels of relationships between human beings and human beings and the environment. Reconciliation is essentially relational and power relations are invoked in all relationships and they are exercised through systems, structures and institutions. Reconciliation as the re-ordering of power relations is the practice of justice in relation to the practice of power. And from the radical ethic and biblical sources the faith community knows that, or does it?

- **Reconciliation as Forgiveness**
South African Allan Boesak and American Curtiss Paul DeYoung have co-authored a book on reconciliation with the sub-title “Beyond Political Pietism and Christian Quietism”. They are opposing politicized reconciliation on the one hand and spiritualized reconciliation on the other. Boesak counters those in South Africa who opposed Tutu’s love of neighbor and forgiveness, on the grounds that these have no place in public or political reconciliation. This he describes as political pietism. DeYoung teaches in Minneapolis, and in the USA he encounters a ‘privatised, evangelical, individualized reconciliation’, which he says has depoliticized reconciliation into Christian quietism. Both approaches, they say ‘seek to tame and defang radical reconciliation’. What if we too have got political pietism and Christian quietism? What if we have all tamed and defanged radical reconciliation?

The political class may not want ideas like mercy and forgiveness. They are too divisive, too religious and religion is part of the problem. Keep it away. Let’s talk about co-existence and respect. The religious class, perhaps more politicized than Christianized, are loyal to the lordship of the Party than to the Lordship of Christ, and may be happy to keep mercy and forgiveness at the level of prayers and hymns, but not in the public square. But neither political pietism nor Christian quietism will do. Reconciliation, somewhere along the way, cannot get around, over or past the radical, liberating dynamics of mercy and forgiveness. They may well make political common sense seem uncomfortable, but they also make church theology feel uncomfortable. We all struggle with mercy or compassion and forgiveness. These are not soft options. They represent the hard edge of reconciliation and human and communal liberation.

Naim Ateek, the Palestinian theologian identifies three paradigms available for people engaged in resolving a conflict. They are the sub-human, the human and the divine. The sub-human paradigm is where ‘Hate, fear, bloodshed, insecurity and revenge are always present… People in
conflict are not willing to transcend their greed, prejudice, or religious extremism to resolve their differences. They demand absolute justice and seek to crush the enemy’. That paradigm is incompatible with the radical ethic of reconciliation, Jewish, Christian and Muslim. The human paradigm makes repentance a precondition of forgiveness. It must precede reconciliation and forgiveness. Repentance is about admitting crime, guilt and injustice. The divine paradigm is the very radical model involved in faith. It is God’s revolutionary model of forgiveness that forgiveness is about initiative, gift, and does not wait for an admission of guilt. ‘All this is from God’, as Paul said. When a human reaches out with forgiveness in this paradigm it is a gift of grace with nothing earned about it. Yet we must avoid turning this paradigm into a form of legalism, a demand that puts more guilt on the victim. Yet forgiveness, which arises from mercy or compassion can be liberating for the one forgiving, even if there is no response from the offender. But it can also be mutually liberating, setting all parties free. ‘The forgiver is set free from the burden of revenge, and the forgiven is set free from guilt’. That does not mean forgetting the injustice, but it is no longer to be dominated and disempowered by it. Forgiveness is release and liberation and it can begin to liberate the wider community as well. At its heart is restorative justice, a practice of justice that restores everyone’s humanity, restores the moral balance and restores a community of wellbeing.

Reconciliation as forgiveness, including mercy and compassion, is not something about which the faith community keeps silence in the public square. Every reconciliation process needs the socio-spiritual strand if it is to be integrated and holistic reconciliation. The liberating and restorative nature of forgiveness is core to reconciliation as justice.

Reconciliation as social justice, reconciliation as the re-ordering of power relations and reconciliation as forgiveness is who we are and what we are for in the integrated process of reconciliation in Northern Ireland.
Christian quietism and political pietism are not fit for reconciliation. Faith and its radical ethic of reconciliation is. The service of reconciliation might begin in the church, but it belongs in the public square.

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REFERENCES

5 Ibid, p257.
6 Ibid, p256.
7 Philpott, op.cit., p126.
10 Ibid, p11.
11 Philpott, op.cit., p171.