

*A Sermon preached by Dr Ralph Walker, on 8 November (Remembrance Sunday) 2009, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

When Fr Michael asked me to preach today, I was in Scotland, and one subject dominated the news there: the return to Libya of Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi. The Scottish Justice Secretary had decided that Mr Megrahi should be allowed to go home to Libya on compassionate grounds, because he was dying of cancer. But Megrahi had been found guilty of the Lockerbie bombing, an appalling act of large-scale terrorism, and had served only a small part of his sentence. Many people, both inside and outside Scotland, were outraged by the Justice Secretary's decision. Many of those who had lost relatives and friends in the crash felt they had been cheated, done out of their rights; and the President of the United States felt much the same.

On Remembrance Day our thoughts tend first towards the two World Wars, because they have so seared our national consciousness. This year, for the first time, there is no one living in this country who fought in the First World War, but its memory is vivid, and is constantly revived by books and films and stories. Today, though, we commemorate all wars, both past and present. We remember those who are fighting today in Afghanistan. We remember those fighting in other wars, and in the devastating conflicts in Africa. We honour their courage and endurance, often in conditions too terrible to imagine. We remember also the victims of war, and all those who have died in war or as a consequence of war, mourning the loss of so many unfinished lives. We remember likewise the victims of terrorism, including those who died in the Lockerbie bombing. The accumulated misery of war is too great to get our minds around. Yet human history has been dominated by war as long as history has been; and the evidence shows that human prehistory was just as bloody and barbaric. There was no Golden Age of peace. And there never will be, unless human nature can change.

Wars can be necessary and justified. Many wars have been; and in the Great Wars of the last century there were large numbers who fought courageously to preserve what was worthwhile, and who were motivated by the highest ends. We remember them with honour, and we must recall how much that we take for granted would not be here but for their courage and steadfastness.

But though wars may be justified, more often they are not. The causes of friction between individuals and the causes of wars between states are complex, but they have common roots. These lie not only in such evidently sinful desires as greed and the lust to control others; they lie also in a deep tendency in our moral thinking. This is the tendency to place great weight on the concept of a right. The motto below the Royal Arms is "Dieu et mon Droit", and very many wars have started because rulers, or their peoples, have thought that their *rights* were not being properly recognized. The endless cycle of the blood feud, which has been widespread from the earliest times to the present, goes on because each side can say their *rights* have been infringed and must be avenged. Those who were incensed at the release of Megrahi felt that they had a *right* to see him serve his term or die in prison. The Justice Secretary talked of compassion. But they felt that if compassion were to be exercised it was *their right* to exercise it and not his – and they did not feel inclined to exercise it. Almost daily, now, people protest that someone who has wronged them is not being punished more severely. We are often reminded that Islamic Law places great weight on retribution, though it does allow those who have been offended against to reduce or to waive the penalty:

that is their right. We are never told that the Qu'ranic text continues "but those who forgive the injury and make reconciliation will be rewarded by God" (Sura 42.40).

The same applies in smaller matters. When I get angry, it is generally because I feel my *rights* are being infringed; or if not my own rights, those of some group to which I belong. I don't think I am unusual in this respect. Jesus, on the other hand, is recorded as angry only once, and that had nothing to do with the infringing of his rights. It was because money-changers were turning the house of prayer into a den of thieves.

The Bible does not talk about rights. It talks about what is right – what is the right way to act. But that is a different matter. It never says that people *have* rights.

This language of rights, rights that people have, is a dangerous currency. It encourages us to stand upon our rights, to exact them from others, to seek to pay back those who have wronged us. It does not sit well with the idea that we should forgive those who have trespassed against us. This feeling that we should stand upon our rights is amongst the principal and continuing causes of strife, both small-scale strife between individuals and the large-scale strife that leads to war. I think we should avoid the language of rights wherever we can. We should stop thinking about our rights. We should instead think about our duties: about what we ought to *do* for others, not about what we ought to *get* from others. Rights do not exist apart from duties. To talk about a right is merely to talk about the duties or obligations that other people have towards the bearers of the rights. It is the duties, the things we ought to do, that are basic. And this is how it must be, for the requirements of morality are requirements upon agents: they tell us what we ought to do and ought not to do.

It is interesting that there is a United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and not a Declaration of Human Duties. The Declaration of Human Rights says that all human beings have the right to life, liberty and security; the American Declaration of Independence says, to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These are fine statements, but far too vague and general. They don't require us to *do* anything. What we need is a universal recognition of the *duty* that falls upon all of us to work for the conditions that would enable everyone in the world to pursue happiness in security and freedom. The language of human rights has become increasingly common since 1948, when the UN Declaration was drawn up. It is not *wrong*, but it is using that dangerous currency of rights that encourages us to think that we have an absolute entitlement to stand on our own rights, and to forget about our duties to others. These duties include duties of compassion and forgiveness, even when (or especially when) our rights have been seriously infringed.

Such duties cut across our "rights". Every *gift* is the surrender of a right. The widow in today's Gospel gave all that she had, her whole living. In giving it, she surrendered her right to that money. This may have been more than was required of her, but it was greatly to her credit in the eyes of Jesus. And to be compassionate and forgiving *is* required of us. A famous former Magdalen student wrote a book that some of you will know, called *Rights are Trumps*. But Dworkin is wrong. Rights are not trumps. Not in the eyes of Jesus; not in the eyes of God.

The Bible does not talk of rights. It does talk of vengeance, and sometimes in what can seem rather a primitive way. But its real message, in Deuteronomy as in St Paul, is that vengeance belongs to God. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." This can seem frightening. It is fitting that God should have a monopoly on revenge, on paying people back. But as the

writer of Hebrews says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10.31). Yet what does God do about it? As the writer of Hebrews also says in today’s Epistle, God has, in Christ, “appeared once for all to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself”, and will return “*not* to deal with sin but to save those who are waiting” (Heb. 9.26, 28). He gave himself up to the death of the cross, having in Isaiah’s words given his back to the smiters and his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; he hid not his face from shame and spitting (Isaiah 50.6).

Jesus was also human. He must often have felt indignation and perhaps despair at the ways in which he was misunderstood, mishandled and abused. He must have experienced those feelings that drive us to anger and encourage us to stand upon our rights. But he did not act on them. He made no attempt to assert his rights. He turned aside Peter’s attempt to defend him. He engaged in no legal debate with his prosecutors. He gave himself freely, in life and in death.

In Magdalen we do not go in for blood feuds. But we are not without our petty animosities. Blood feuds go on, and wars break out, because people are not willing to forgive, not willing to absorb the evil that has been done to them without seeking a recompense that will only make things worse. We may not be at war with those around us, but in human groups the same cycles of resentment and reprisal are constantly recurring, and in these lie the seeds of war. Jesus’ death points us to the only real way out of these cycles: he does not seek to return evil for evil, but rather to absorb the evil, taking it upon himself without returning it back; and so bringing it to an end.

This does not mean putting up with just anything; it does not mean putting up with the money-changers in the Temple. On a national level, it certainly does not mean that it is always wrong to go to war. There are circumstances, far too many circumstances, in which fighting is the only way to defeat something profoundly evil. It is because they believe this that our soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan now, and it is because they believed this that so many of those who fought in the world wars sacrificed their lives. They were not seeking revenge, but to prevent an evil that threatened to engulf civilisation. We owe them immense and continuing gratitude. But such circumstances would be much less likely to occur if we could take up the fight within ourselves, and defeat that part of us that insists upon our rights, demanding to pay back every wrong. Then we might have the courage to forgive, and to absorb the evil, as Jesus did, with no thought of returning it back against those who have trespassed against us. That would by no means be enough to get the wolf to dwell with the lamb, or the leopard to lie down with the kid. But it would be a start. And it is in our power.