



CONTEMPORARY  
CHRISTIANITY  
BIBLICAL FAITH FOR  
A CHANGING WORLD

# The TENTH CATHERWOOD LECTURE in PUBLIC THEOLOGY JUSTICE, MERCY and WALKING with GOD: the mission of the church and the future of reconciliation in Northern Ireland

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## *Introduction*

Thank you for the warm welcome and kind introduction. It is good to be home in Belfast, no mean city - "walled by mountain and moated by sea and undermined by deposits of history." So said William J Philbin, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor in his book, *the bright invisible*. We are here to mark what I hope has been a good deposit of history. Yet we do so with the ever present reminders of the toxic deposits which continue to pollute relationships in this community, particularly in the political process.

In a recent posting on Facebook, Prof John Brewer, co-author of *Religion, Civil Society and Peace in Northern Ireland*, paid tribute to a previous generation who had worked for peace in N Ireland. Alex Reid, John Dunlop, Ken Newell, Harold Good and, wait for it, David Porter. The struggle between incredulity in being considered on such a list and a rather smug self-satisfied pride was soon drowned out in a cry of deep offence. "What does he mean by a previous generation? I'm not even 55 yet!"

As the angry young man, being mentored and tempered by the mature (dare I say middle aged?) wisdom of David Hewitt, Brian Moore and Ken Wilson, it was with trepidation that I entered David's Belfast solicitor's office in 1986 for a meeting of our unlikely gang of four. The outcome was a decision to each invite five friends to discuss what response, informed by our evangelical commitment to the authority of the bible, might be appropriate to the profound uncertainty and conflict within what we now call the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community (PUL), a condition brought about by the signing of the 1985 Anglo Irish Agreement.

The twenty four, who subsequently gathered in Dunmurry on the campus of Belfast Bible College, could not begin to imagine the challenge and tumultuous change that lay ahead.

The ideal and value of AGREEMENT that was so threatening in 1985 became redeemed in a community whose face seemed hard set against it, as successively the Belfast Agreement of 1998, the St Andrew's Agreement in 2006 and the Hillsborough Agreement of 2010 created the political framework for a future together.

## *A Challenge to the Church's Mission*

Brewer seems to have inherited the anger (grumpy old man) - I leave it for others to decide about the wisdom - and has confronted the churches with a challenge to their mission today. In a conference in March of 2011, reported extensively by Gladys Ganiel on the *Sluggie O'Toole* website, Brewer, says Ganiel, **lamented** that:

'There is no public discourse on forgiveness, hope, compassion, resentment or anger. ... Hope is not a word in the lexicon of the churches. ... There has been no religious discourse in Northern Ireland on human rights issues, truth recovery, transitional justice themes like reparation, memory, or the restorative integration of ex-combatants.'

He wants churches to 'deconstruct' the ethno-religious myths that have fuelled division and conflict for so long.

'The churches are uninterested in post-violence reconstruction. ... Are the churches capable of doing anything anymore, even if they wanted to? The institutional churches continue to evade their responsibility in the public sphere. ... The churches' futures are diminished by their failures to take responsibility for the past.'

Given that I and hopefully the others who shared in the ECONI story from 1987 to 2005, when ECONI voluntarily dissolved to give way to the Centre for Contemporary Christianity, thought that we, along with others in the churches, were doing precisely all of that, my response to Brewer's comments was immediately defensive.

However what John (and note the switch to the friendly John from the antagonistic Brewer) has done is remind us of an uncomfortable truth. The corrosive and toxic seduction to claim God for our side, our land as somehow holy and to cast ourselves in the role of the chosen people is ever present. (It is the sons, always the sons, of Ulster and daughters of holy mother Ireland). Each generation needs to lay to rest the lie of what Conor Cruise O'Brien calls our ancestral voices; voices which cause us to particularise faith in God, not incarnate it to transform our culture; to hold it captive to our bloody histories, not set ourselves free by Christ's liberation; and to excuse our exclusion of the other, not welcome their embrace in the love and grace of God.

What it means to walk humbly with and in the name of the Lord our God requires each generation of the church to critically examine how they hold faith in their time and place. In the midst of the division, hatred and increasing violence of our fractured world, we struggle to develop the moral imagination to resolve our differences without violence. We deny our identity as citizens of the kingdom of God, failing to live secure in the arms of Christ, a common theme of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, and so unable to rejoice in the diversity of God's creation. How we live with our deepest differences, is as Os Guinness reminds us (here in Ireland and in the wider world), the critical quest of our times.

### *Approach*

The story of For God and His Glory Alone is of how a small group of Ulster evangelicals embarked on such a quest. In telling something of that story from the inside, I wish to reflect on why I think it was possible. Focusing on the first five years from 1987, I will leave us in 1992 and the launch of the now infamous Action Packs, an event whose theme inspires the title of this lecture. Few then anticipated the declarations to come, in 1993 of 'no selfish nor strategic interest' by a sovereign power; and in 1994 of ceasefires by those whose interest they had once thought was best served by killing and bombing.

After reflecting on this foundation story of ECONI I then would like to consider some of the things that make for peace that I think we may have learnt as we walked with a God who is just and merciful. And to relate this to the story which for 5 years I have had the privilege to nurture, and weave new threads in the ongoing tapestry bearing witness to the glory of Christ in whom God reconciles all things, that is the story of Coventry Cathedral.

### *A Community's Story*

The public story of ECONI began in the thirtieth year of this child of God and the twentieth year of what we call...well what do we call 'it'? "It" being what was in 1988 a twenty year period during which in this small island of great hatreds, human beings did brutal violence and deep harm to other human beings. A period that was to last another 20 years and now the spectre of its worst excesses haunts not our past but our future.

It is no small matter that the events which profoundly shaped the lives of all of us and brought significant life changing trauma, injury and loss to far too many, evade a shared epitaph. The armed struggle, the terror campaign, the war, the conflict in and about N Ireland. The Troubles - an understated word with a capital TROUBLES.

As people of an island of stories and story tellers, of the masters of poetry and song, language fails us and robs us of a context in which to tell the story of our lives. What exactly was it that we lived through? What words can we find that are not loaded, predicated on moral, political, historical, cultural, theological and spiritual assumptions. Assumptions that are used to undermine the story and experience of others, and serve to delegitimise or erase the story of the other - to de-story their lives. To render them meaningless. To declare them and their story illegitimate. Our story the only true story.

Indeed it often seems that the harsh story of this island peoples over several centuries has created a hard heartedness. We are a people who find it impossible to live in the presence of each other's story. Something of this dysfunctional relationship is captured by John Hewitt - An Irishman in Coventry - which it would simply be rude not to include.

A full year since, I took this eager city,  
the tolerance that laced its blatant roar,  
its famous steeples and its web of girders,  
as image of the state hope argued for,  
and scarcely flung a bitter thought behind me  
on all that flaws the glory and the grace  
which ribbons through the sick, guilt-clotted legend  
of my creed-haunted, godforsaken race.  
My rhetoric swung round from steel's high promise  
to the precision of the well-gauged tool,  
tracing the logic in the vast glass headlands,  
the clockwork horse, the comprehensive school.  
Then, sudden, by occasion's chance concerted,  
in enclave of my nation, but apart,  
the jigging dances and the lilting fiddle  
stirred the old rage and pity in my heart.  
The faces and the voices blurring round me,  
the strong hands long familiar with the spade,  
the whiskey-tinctured breath, the pious buttons,  
called up a people endlessly betrayed  
by our own weakness, by the wrongs we suffered  
in that long twilight over bog and glen,  
by force, by famine and by glittering fables  
which gave us martyrs when we needed men,  
by faith which had no charity to offer,  
by poisoned memory, and by ready wit,  
with poverty corroded into malice,  
to hit and run and howl when it is hit.  
This is our fate: eight hundred years' disaster,  
crazily tangled as the Book of Kells;  
the dream's distortion and the land's division,  
the midnight raiders and the prison cells.  
Yet like Lir's children, banished to the waters,  
our hearts still listen for the landward bells.

### *A Story of Faith*

This state of mutual antipathy to each other's story would be tragedy enough for any people destined to share an island together. That it exists among people whose deep story has been formed by the Christian faith story is for those who love Jesus, a matter of deep reproach.

The story of our mutual hatreds has in succeeding generations won out over the story of faith. Hewitt's poem reflects what our faith has become; it has no charity, is corroded into malice by our poisoned memory, and is fated by our violent embrace of each other to destroy what we each cherish.

Perhaps some of this distortion of faith comes from not acknowledging that our faith is indeed a story - a story we are invited to remember in the eucharist - a story of Jesus and his love. Not a proposition to be argued nor a doctrine to be defended, a jurisdiction to grow or a boundary to be held; not even a kingdom to be extended; but a story to be told in the living of our lives - the story of the person Jesus, walking humbly with God in the paths of justice and mercy.

Stanley Hauerwas defines reconciliation in terms of shared story. "Reconciliation is when my enemy tells me my story and I am able to say, yes that is my story." Therefore, he goes on to say, "God is our greatest enemy". In this I take him to mean that in the story of Jesus, God with us, the divine lives our human story and in so doing tells us our story in a way we are able to recognise and own.

When confronted with the inevitable consequences of the human story, a story that takes Jesus to the cross, we are drawn by divine love into repentance in which God's judgment of the human condition is proved just and in mercy extends forgiveness and we are at peace with God. God was in Christ reconciling all things.

The invitation to salvation is the invitation to re-narrate our story and, through the grace and mercy of God, to begin again. To align our story with the story of the upside down kingdom, in which the king rides on a donkey and washes the feet of his followers. When that happens there is new creation, a new story, reconciliation. It is manifest in lives of holiness, hope and love. Its character is Peace, for it is as peacemakers that the true identity of the children of God is revealed.

Faith in Jesus invites us to re-narrate our story of the last 40 years in such a way so as we can deal with our past morally and constructively. To open ourselves to a future with hope in which the shared enterprise (a phrase recently used by Lesley Carroll) of living together in this part of God's earth may conceivably flourish. All within the integrity, complexity and diversity of our interdependent stories.

### *The ECONI (Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland) Story*

The ECONI story is part of this bigger communal story. How did we walk in our time and place? Our journey was navigated between two compass points, which set the course for any church which finds itself in situation of violence and conflict. The compass points of the Pastoral and Prophetic. We walked...

- In the shadow of the valley of death (Pastoral)
- In the name of the Lord our God (Prophetic)

For God and His Glory Alone represented the coming together of several journeys, the first of these being responsible for coining the phrase in response to an earlier period of violent political turmoil in PUL community.

That was when Alan Flavell and Brian Moore in 1980 / 81 in response to another political crisis put an advert in the Belfast Telegraph entitled 'For God and his Glory Alone'. An initiative picked up by David Bruce who with other made a similar statement in 1985 in response to the Anglo- Irish Agreement.

The second stream was a group of businessmen and professionals led by David Hewitt who out of the northern consensus group under the theme the 'Word of God for Ireland Today' organized conferences asking 'What does God have to say to us today?'

The third stream was ICSC (Irish Christian Study Centre), an imaginative initiative applying faith to all sorts of areas of intellectual life, who had a conference on Faith and Culture.

Finally there was Belfast YMCA with its commitment to cross community work especially with young people which grew into a practical partnership with ECONI in the early days.

It was a distinctly Evangelical enterprise - a word we later spent hours defining. It took us from An Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland - from which we took our name - to Evangelicals Asking Questions - the sub theme of the 1992 April event launching the Action Packs and which set the scene for the 1993 development of a formal organisation.

The drafting of *For God and His Glory Alone* covered difficult terrain in difficult times. We were forced to critically examine our approach. In late 1987 as we were preparing our first major draft, the debate on forgiveness prompted by Gordon Wilson's remarks after the horror of the Enniskillen bombing made us stop and think again. To see adverts in the *Belfast Telegraph* for Gospel Hall meetings throughout the city questioning whether Christians should offer forgiveness when some of us thought that was what the gospel was about was somewhat of a wakeup call.

In early 1998 we had the Gibraltar killings and the events around the Milltown cemetery. The nihilism of young people running towards a mad man throwing grenades, the total evil of the willingness of a mob to beat to death two young men for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and the critical impact of those events was well covered in a recent BBC documentary.

It not only exposed the destructive logic of violence that would take our communities to the edge, but in that poignant story that while he knelt to give the two soldiers the last rites, Al Reid had in his pocket a draft of a possible Hume-Adams communique that he was to give to Adams at the fringes of the funeral. When he then delivered it, it had the blood of those corporals on it. Of such things are peace processes made

It was a creative process - producing text alongside Trevor Morrow, David McMillan with comment from the other twenty four in the group - was one of the most stimulating theological conversations I have known. And in this sense it was a profoundly theological enterprise. We set out to contribute a biblical narrative to the church which invited it to critique its own complicity in a divided community as the only basis from which to speak to wider society.

'Wherever Christ is, he always goes against the flow.' ('Wo Christus ist, geht er allzeit wider den Strom.' Martin Luther, 1517)

### *A Global Story*

What made this questioning possible? The ECONI founding story took place at the point where three significant movements that transformed global Christianity in the middle of the last century were having their greatest impact.

These movements emerged in a context of social, cultural and political change - total war, collapse of empires, rise of totalitarian regimes, post-colonial nationalism, and extreme poverty - alongside a new global awareness of our interconnectedness - combined with the technological potential for much good alongside growing extremism and the threat of nuclear annihilation. The list could go on.

The point to note is how much of this, what was going on in our world, marginalised the church. Christian faith, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century was largely irrelevant to the main exercise of political power - the waging of war and the accumulating of treasure. The nihilism of total war and the selfish greed of materialism produced a secular generation in which the church was increasingly ignored in social and political discourse. Yet in response the churches across all streams responded imaginatively.

In the Catholic Church Vatican 2 produced a new openness and the rise of liberation theology – something that we should mark and acknowledge as Patrick Mitchell has done in a recent paper to the Irish Inter-church Meeting.

In the ecumenical world the post war establishment of the World Council of Churches rectified the destructive impact on the vision of Christian unity in Edinburgh 1910 which died on the western front and helped the church to focus again on justice and peace in the hope of creating a new world order.

And within evangelicalism the rise of the Lausanne movement in the 1974 conference provided a new framework for bringing together evangelism and social action as God intended them.

This was the broader theological context in which various groups like ECONI emerged - Corrymeela, Glencree, Faith and Politics group. We were all part of change on a global scale in which the church was finding its voice in relation to our time and place in imaginative and radical ways. Some of this goes some way to explain why John Brewer may be right. As to why it is not possible for the church today, indeed it is not capable, of such radical engagement.

Today's global church context is deeply conservative (in the Roman Catholic world) confused and marginal (in the Ecumenical world) and finding security in old paths - Pietism and Political faith (in the evangelical world). Something in us did not like what our very theological engagement our was producing. Progressive voices find it difficult to be heard in today's church. A new theological revolution is required. One that is grounded in a renewed spirituality rooted in a biblical understanding in this time of the common good and of human flourishing in the context of deep differences and the rich diversity of the human community.

As the geopolitical settlements of the post-colonial era, set in the 1920's, collapse as we see throughout the Middle East and North Africa, hitching our journey of faith to transient political identities on this divided island is more futile than ever. The renegotiation of EU and UK identities gathers pace and highlights that even more.

### *A Story of Identity*

This ongoing process applies to cultural identity as much as to national identity. A deep rooted sectarianism is the shared legacy of all who have been formed in our island story. It is the result of a profound insecurity which arises from the corrosive definition of me as not you.

This is especially apt in relation to the PUL community. (A phrase first coined at a Community Relations Council conference facilitated by Tony Macaulay looking at how we engage with the Protestant working class community. During the discussion people said 'I may be loyalist but I am not a religious Protestant' or 'I am a Protestant but not a Loyalist' or 'I am Unionist but not a Loyalist'. Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL) is now used to describe this varied community.)

We need to critically **engage** with how this is now being used to create an identity of a misunderstood and oppressed minority people. How it is being used to draw the defensive boundary of the tribe. To critically engage with that we need **first** to create the space for this story to be heard, to be acknowledged. And that requires those of us who have our roots in that community to reflect again on what it means to have Protestant identity on this island, to look again about what it means to believe in a union and to be a unionist.

One of the interesting things about For God and his Glory Alone is that one of its subtexts was to say it was acceptable to be Irish nationalist and evangelical but what it was heard to say was that you can't be unionist and evangelical. We never intended to say that and most people who signed it were unionist. For me this shows the deep insecurity of a community which finds itself on the wrong shore of history and is not being listened to. No more is this more keenly felt than in the loyalist working class community. It is something our middle class churches should take note of.

### *A Story of Belonging*

When I worked for BMMF in the 1980s recruiting people to go to Asia I went to a Christian Union where 60% of the students at Stranmillis, a teacher training college, attended. I went in the hope that some would do a summer placement or spend their lives overseas as missionaries. What difference are those Christian teachers making in working class education in our primary schools in Northern Ireland? This is the most critical issue for the loyalist communities, the disrespect for education and the deskilling of the whole community. So it is fair to ask, as most stayed in Northern Ireland, is their faith making a difference for the community that gave them birth, to the story in which they share, whether their middle class sensibilities like it or not?

Let me share two perspectives that challenge some of the things that are said about British identity on our streets. The Meriden flag story. For three of the last five years we lived in the village of Meriden, in the rectory opposite the village green whilst we waited for our house to sell in Belfast.

On nineteen designated days of the year on a beautifully painted white flag pole in the middle of the village green a proud retired British soldier left his home in the village and came at dawn to raise the flag and came back to take it down at sunset, with dignity and respect. When they put the tender in the local paper for someone to replace him I was tempted to apply.

Do we not think that treating the national flag with respect is better than the disrespect that we show to it, and which at times undermines the very arguments that we are trying to make? How much better that every loyalist community put up a nice white painted flag pole and at dawn raise the flag and at sunset lower the flag, rather than leaving it to hang on a lamppost as a rag. That is British identity?

And what is this Britain that we want to belong to? Come to Coventry to the primary schools where over 200 languages or dialects are spoken. To Coventry on the verge of being the second British city to become majority non-white. Where Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Christian, are learning to narrate a shared story. Many have come from communities that have known war and violence at a more intense level than even here in Northern Ireland.

Together they narrate a story of what it means to be British in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The vision of Britishness that I see on the streets of Belfast is not the vision that I find in the heart of England in the city of Coventry.

But this is also a bigger crisis of government. I do have to ask myself what it means for the government in Whitehall to be British. The current lack of government engagement in the Northern Ireland situation betrays a deep seated colonial analysis at the heart of the Whitehall establishment. That we are not really part of them, and that somehow those horrible tribes should just be left to get on with it.

This attitude fuels deep insecurity in the Protestant, Ulster Unionist and Loyalist communities. Quite frankly, the Secretary of State's recent speech at the British Irish Association in Cambridge was a disgrace. It evidenced historical amnesia and political abandonment of the worst sort. The British government needs to reengage with what is going on here. I am almost bound to make the political point that at every point in our story where loyalist and unionist communities have felt most threatened by British attitudes it has been under a Tory government, which is meant to be the most unionist and standing for what it means to be British. (There ends the party political broadcast).

### *Walking with God*

Walking humbly with God is about the story we tell of who we are in Christ. It is a profoundly political story, about loyalties, about belonging and the bounds and bonds that build communities. It is about being a reconciled and reconciling people in a world of deep alienation. It is about doing justice and loving mercy.

A biblical understanding of justice is profoundly relational. What does it mean to act justly towards God, our neighbours, the earth, even our enemies?

It requires us to tell the truth. To acknowledge injustice in our relationships. If as Duncan Morrow contests, politics is the art of negotiating relationships, a just political settlement is where a new relationship is established. A relationship in which historical and perceived injustices are addressed.

There will be respect for the identity of the other and fair interactions across a range of societal functions, with equal access to resources, jobs, education, housing. Such a renegotiation can only be done by those who are confident in who they are and have no need to undermine the other. A settlement will only be accepted as just when it is experienced as just. Such settlements of course risk being experienced as unjust by those who have been the beneficiaries of historic injustice. And that goes some way to explain how unionists feel in this community.

### *Injustice of Violence*

In the breakdown of relationship it is the injustice of violence that leaves the most terrible legacy. Nothing, (nothing, nothing) can justify the use of violence for political ends in our recent story. Yet no community stands apart from the recourse to violence over long years of contesting this narrow ground. The Christian pacifist tradition has little traction in our theologies on this island.

Until it does we all collude in the blasphemy of violence against human beings made in the image of God. Without a culture of peace formed and nurtured by our Christian faith we simply do not have the capacity to respond redemptively in a violent world.

Think about how the Amish responded to shootings in the US three years ago, it was a response which came out of their deep spiritual formation as people of peace. Civil disobedience only works when non-violence is used to provoke, expose and shame the violence of the oppressor. If we haven't learnt that from Ghandi and Martin Luther King we have learnt nothing.

In a culture where none of our major churches are willing to expose and reject the culture of violence on which even our democratic political order is based, is it any wonder that when confronted with issues of contested identity and rights, whether in 1968 on the streets of the Bogside or in 2013 on Twaddell Avenue, the conflict quickly becomes violent.

It is in this context that all are complicit; yet some remain culpable. What I mean simply by that is, a community can be complicit in a culture of violence but the individuals who chose to use violence to harm others are culpable for that action. The culture does not excuse the choice they make.

A just settlement acknowledges our shared complicity in creating the context for harm. While accountability before the courts establishes the culpability of the individual for the harm caused, the goal of a Judaeo-Christian criminal justice system is always reconciliation - the restoration of an offender into the life of the community having paid an appropriate penalty for their act of harm towards another.

### *Loving Mercy*

A biblical understanding of mercy is profoundly countercultural. Far from being a weak appeasement it is at the heart of God's character to always show mercy.

Because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:13

The prophet Micah exhorts us to love mercy. Far from moral appeasement forgiveness provides us with a moral foundation from which to deal with the past. To set aside injustice and break the cycle of victims and perpetrators.

A cycle in which our respective traditions have played both parts throughout history. Christian forgiveness does not say it doesn't matter. Precisely the opposite, it matters so much that God sent Jesus to die. As Desmond Tutu rightly says, without forgiveness there is no future.

### *The Coventry Story*

My story as a son of Ulster, my story as part of the ECONI story, my story as a child of these Troubles, has over the last five years come to be told within the demanding architecture of Coventry Cathedral and another story of faith in the face of violence. It is a compelling story, a story which has invited me to re-narrate my story. And in doing so to reflect a little more critically on the ECONI story. And as I get caught up in this story, my story changes.

In response to the bombing of the Cathedral in 1940 Provost Dick Howard, a rather high church, evangelical Edwardian Anglican responded out of a deep faith to offer forgiveness to those who had bombed his city. He had the words 'Father Forgive' inscribed on the walls of the ruined Cathedral and when challenged that they should be 'Father Forgive Them' he said 'no'. It remained Father Forgive because we are all complicit in the culture that has destroyed our world.

What is remarkable is not just what he said after the bombing but what he actually said the Sunday before. When in the darkest days of 1940 he talked about after the war that the British people needed not to make the same mistake of 1918/1919 and make a proper peace with their former enemies. Not a peace based on vengeance which Versailles represented to the German people. And after the war he lived that out. He showed through the love of enemy that in the grace and in the mercy of God that it was possible for enemies to become friends.

Over the last five years I have stood at memorials where thousands have died in Germany and in Russia and stood there with German citizens weeping over their loss. There is a new spirit in Germany that feels able, 60 or 70 years on, to reflect on what they suffered.

I have come to understand that reconciliation truly happens when we are able to memorialise the suffering of our enemy. And it was a real privilege to be part of a process at Coventry Cathedral where despite our commitment to reconciliation there was no mention of what we did to Germany in the allied bombing campaign. Yet everywhere I went in Germany they told of the hurt and harm done to Coventry. And last year as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the new Cathedral, we received a gift of a sculpture from the Church and people of Dresden called 'Choir of Survivors' which we have dedicated to all civilians affected by aerial bombing, and especially the citizens of Germany through the 1940-45 campaign.

The current Bishop of Coventry, Christopher Cocksworth, calls our Litany of reconciliation 'Coventry's Confession of Complicity'. That is truth. We are all complicit. And only as we stand recognizing our mutual need for forgiveness that it is truly possible to heal the wounds of history.

### *A Story of Redemption*

This is a radical story, gospel story. As the weight of the cross smashed into the ground and his body jarred in agony, we are invited to understand the pain of Jesus not primarily from the physicality of the blood lust portrayed by Mel Gibson, for thousands also suffered such a cruel death. And many even more cruel deaths since then. Rather it is understood in terms of the angst depicted best in the paintings of El Greco as Jesus bears the sins of the world.

This is the story that redeems our story, enacted at the heart of our worship in the breaking of bread and sharing the cup of wine. The blood lust of a violent world forces us to confront honestly the myth of redemptive violence, a metaphor we too easily lapse into.

We have a profound theological dilemma. For if it is the violence done to Jesus that achieves salvation what hope for a world of ideological fanaticism wedded to violent change, whether of the Marxist variety that fuelled the IRA, or the Islamists of Al Qaeda. There is a sharp political reality to be faced - does violence work? (Ronan Fanning has provocatively confronted us with this in his book 'Fatal Path') In a world dominated by the culture of death, it clearly does and a lazy theology of redemptive violence gives legitimacy to this myth. Rather the profound question should be 'does violence produce the conditions for human flourishing?' If the answer is no to the Loyalists on the streets today, it is also no to the Republicans who hid in the hedgerows of yesterday.

It also has to be no for the state. Violence can never be the basis for nation building.

It is also, I have come to believe, a profound no for God, who accepts the efficacy of Christ's death not in the manner of his death and the violence done to him, but in the self-emptying sacrificial embrace of the hate and violence that this world offers.

Faced with the agony of a world where people cannot tolerate being in the presence of each other's story, Jesus cries it is finished. No more. New creation. Collapsed walls. All things reconciled.

It is a profoundly evangelical contribution to state that the mission of the church and the future of reconciliation rest on our willingness, capacity, ability and openness to re-narrate our public theology of the cross for our time and place. It is the scandal of the cross that is the most potent political force for good.

Foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. A sign of weakness in a culture where the might of Greece and Rome was all powerful. An indicator of moral compromise amongst the self-righteous of Israel who thought that law, land, temple and cultural purity could save them.

In God's economy the innocent bears the pain, absorbs the violence. A just relationship is restored on the only basis it can be, the mercy of God to me, to you, to sinners.

### ***Mission of Reconciliation***

When the Consultative Group on the Past was set up (the Eames Bradley group) there was not a little consternation in some circles that it contained too many God bother-ers. We would fudge the issue of terrorist or state violence and injustice. Our report sets out a comprehensive framework within which I still believe we can deal with the past before it deals with us. But as highlighted by the controversy over one small recommendation, our ability to do this rests on our capacity to simply acknowledge that the hurt suffered through the years of violence is at root profoundly human and it is in the humanity of even my enemy that there is hope for healing and reconciliation.

I believe this can only come about because God does bother - so much that he sent Jesus. Forgiveness is not a fudge. It alone can create the conditions under which free acknowledgement of wrong done can be given, the truth be told of what happened and why and the possibility to walk together can be created. In this the Church should be the space in which we are welcome to come as broken peoples and communities to be greeted by Christ broken and shared out for our salvation.

This is our ministry of reconciliation. Everything else at best bears witness to this counter cultural kingdom of God, at worst a clanging cymbal of our self-importance. Today the church risks replacing its chaplaincy of the tribes which beset its past in this community, with a chaplaincy of a political process which is all too human, deeply flawed and faced at every turn with the choice between the unpalatable and the disastrous.

We need to have the courage to be the church.

Let the church be the church. The place of forgiveness and mercy. No one else can be. It is our only gift to give in the future of reconciliation in this community.

### **CANON DAVID W PORTER**

**2013 marks 25 years since the first publication of "For God and His Glory Alone", the landmark publication which shaped the work of the Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI).**

**David Porter is well known as a co-founder and then Director of ECONI (Evangelical Contribution on N Ireland). He has served on the N Ireland Community Relations Council, the N Ireland Civic Forum and the independent Consultative Group on the Past (Eames/Bradley). He represented N Ireland on the Evangelical Alliance UK Board, for three years as its chair.**

**Since 2008, David has been the Canon Director for Reconciliation Ministry at Coventry Cathedral and in February 2013 was appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury's Director for Reconciliation.**

**The annual Catherwood Lecture was established in 2003 and explores an issue relating to Christian worldview or faith in the public square. It is named in honor of Sir Fred Catherwood, an Ulsterman, Industrialist, Christian Leader and former Vice President of the European Parliament.**