

ARCHDIOCESE OF GLASGOW



CHARLES JOHN COBB MEMORIAL LECTURE SPEECH GIVEN BY HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL THOMAS J. WINNING AT CROYDON

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the organising committee

I'm very grateful to you for inviting me to deliver this Charles John Cobb memorial Lecture for the year 2000.

I won't attempt to pull the wool over your eyes by saying how much I have admired Charles Cobb all my life. The truth is that I learned all I know of your hero in recent weeks while preparing this talk.

But despite my recent knowledge of Cobb, I can say in all sincerity that I have found his story an inspiring one. The story of an admirable person, who underwent quite extreme persecution on account of his beliefs.

For those of you who are not familiar with Cobb, he was a young management clerk in a tea merchant's firm here in Croydon, married with a young child. When the Great War broke out in 1914 his pacifist principles would not allow him to sign up for military service.

On August 31 1915 he was arrested and subsequently sentenced to five terms of imprisonment with hard labour.

In March 1919, he was released early from prison on account of his broken health, but died 20 days later at home with his family. He was 41 years of age and left a wife and child almost unprovided for.

Tonight I do not come here to pass judgement on the subject of the 1914-1918 war. The question of just war theory is one that is very complex.

I state also, right at the outset that admiration for Cobb's courage in no way lessens my respect and admiration for the men from all over Europe who fought and died in the Great War, often for a cause they barely understood.

My own father took part in some of those campaigns.

I remember as a child - caught up as children are in wonderment at apparently exciting times - asking my father what he had done during the war.

I recall how he brought us down to earth, not by recounting deeds of valour, but by recalling the stench of the mud and the beast-infestation which plagued the men in the trenches.

He taught me a very valid lesson early on. The lesson that war is never glamorous. War is never exciting or thrilling or an adventure.

Charles Cobb understood that very well, though it was not fear which motivated his stance against taking up arms.

He was driven on by the burning belief in God's commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

Today, the Church, while recognising the right of the state to call to arms its citizens to preserve the common good, also recognises the legitimacy of a stance like Cobb's.

In Italy, for example, where military service is still compulsory, the Church co-operates with the state to offer a form of civil rather than military service through which young people offer their services for a year or 18 months at homes run by the Church for drug addicts; victims of AIDS; the elderly and inner-city clinics.

These projects offer a very great service to both the nation and the young individuals who work there for a short period.

Unfortunately times were very different for Charles Cobb.

Then, the national mobilisation would admit of no, or very few exceptions. General Kitchener loudly proclaimed: "Your country needs you" from every poster. Young men from all walks of life marched off to sign up for a war few of them understood.

Against that background, it must have been very hard for Charles John Cobb to stand up for what he believed to be right.

His view that peace was a cause worth sacrificing one's life for was a noble one.

Just 20 years later it was echoed by another "martyr for peace", Pope Pius XII. In the weeks leading up to the declaration of World War II his efforts at dissuading the potential opponents from declaring all-out war became ever-more insistent, culminating, in his famous appeal "Nulla e perdita con la pace, tutto lo può essere con la guerra" Nothing is lost with peace - everything can be lost with war.

Over the years that refrain has frequently been echoed by the Church, and still today it remains the Church's response when war threatens to break out round the world.

Every year, the Church marks January 1st as a World Day of Prayer for Peace.

This year, the Great Jubilee Year 2000 should help us to look back at the 20th century we have just left and learn lessons for the 21st into which we have just entered.

So how does the Church judge the 100 years which have just gone. What areas of light and shadow are we able to detect?

I think it's important to be hopeful. And so we should recognise that the century just ended has seen remarkable advances in science which have considerably improved people's life and health.

These advances have also contributed to our dominion over nature and made easier people's access to culture. Information technology has made the world smaller and brought us closer to one another. Never before were we so quickly informed about the daily events which affect the lives of our brothers and sisters in the human family.

But one question can be asked: was this century also the century of "brotherhood"?

Here I do not believe an unqualified answer can be given.

As the balance is made, the memory of bloody wars which have decimated millions of people and provoked massive exoduses, shameful genocides which haunt our memories, as well as the arms race which fostered mistrust and fear, terrorism and ethnic conflicts which annihilated peoples who had lived together in the same territory, all force us to be modest and in many cases to have what the Pope calls "a penitent spirit".

The life sciences and biotechnology continue to find new fields of application, yet they also raise the problem of the limits imposed by the need to safeguard people's dignity, responsibility and safety.

Globalization, which has transformed economic systems by creating unexpected possibilities of growth, has also resulted in many people being relegated to the side of the road: unemployment in the more developed countries and extreme poverty in too many countries of the southern hemisphere continue to hold millions of women and men back from progress and prosperity.

For this reason the Holy Father suggests that the century now beginning ought to be the century of solidarity. The humanitarian efforts deployed during recent conflicts and natural catastrophes - one thinks for example of the current crisis in Mozambique - inspire praiseworthy initiatives of altruism which reveal a greater sense of solidarity, especially among the younger generation.

The Church's own aid agencies, CAFOD and SCIAF are currently working to mobilise the Catholic community to help provide emergency relief for the stricken peoples of Mozambique.

Some of the television images we have seen have been quite shocking - surely a spur to generosity on the part of any right-thinking man or woman.

As I said, the younger generation are often a great example to us of genuine solidarity and altruism and for that I think we should be grateful. For that sensitivity to others' needs will be necessary as today's children grow into tomorrow's opinion formers.

It seems to me that, thanks to the growth of democracy, the men and women of the 21st century will be called to a greater sense of responsibility for the world they live in.

What exactly do we mean when we prescribe our recipe for a truly fruitful 21st century as a century of solidarity?

Solidarity is not that general feeling of compassion or passing upset at other people's misfortunes (cf TV pictures of Mozambique)

It is much more than that. It is a firm and enduring determination to commit oneself to the common good: to the good of all and each individual because we are really responsible for all.

This determination is based on the solid conviction that full development is hindered by the uncontrolled desire for profit and the thirst for power. The "structures of sin" as John Paul II calls them, are only conquered by a diametrically opposed attitude: a commitment to the good of one's neighbour with the readiness - in the Gospel sense - to lose oneself for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him. A readiness to serve him rather than oppressing him for one's own advantage.

The exercise of solidarity in society is authentic when the more influential, those with a greater share of the world's goods feel responsible for the weaker and are ready to share with them.

The weaker, in the same spirit of solidarity, must not stand by passively, but do their utmost for the good of all.

Among the positive signs of our age is the growing awareness of the solidarity of the poor among themselves and their efforts to support one another.

In the international field interdependence has to be transformed into solidarity on the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all.

The stronger and richer nations must have a sense of moral responsibility for the others so that a proper international system is established resting on the foundations of equality of all peoples and respect for their own traditions and cultures.

At the same time the weaker nations must be helped to make a contribution of their own to the common good.

Solidarity therefore helps us to see "the other" - whether it be the other person or nation - not just as a kind of instrument with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited which can be discarded when no longer useful, but as a neighbour.

In this way solidarity is the path to peace and development.

Because solidarity demands self-sacrifice there are many points of contact between solidarity and charity. In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself to take on the specifically Christian dimension of total fraternity, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Any new era of solidarity supposes that we must renounce idols such as prosperity at any price, material wealth as the only value, science as the sole explanation of reality.

It supposes that the rule of law will be applied and respected and all people enjoy equal access to health, education and the fruits of the earth. It also supposes that God will have his rightful place in people's lives: the first place.

Charles John Cobb had his priorities right. At his trial in 1915 he stated: "I fear God, not man. The commandment is 'Thou shalt not kill'. I obey that."

In a world more than ever in search of meaning, Christians sense the call, as this century opens, to proclaim with greater fervour that Jesus is the Redeemer of mankind, and the answer to humanity's longings.

A new century of solidarity calls for certain precise commitments. Some of these are quite urgent:

- Firstly, I would point to the need for greater sharing of technology and prosperity: In the absence of an attitude of understanding and readiness to help, it would be difficult to restrain the frustration felt by certain countries which see themselves condemned to founder ever more precariously and at the same time to have to compete with other countries. Here the issue of the debt of poor countries is particularly relevant.
- Secondly respect for human rights: The legitimate aspirations of the most defenceless, the very young and very old, the claims of ethnic minorities, the sufferings of all those whose religious beliefs or culture are not recognised are not merely optional issues, to be dealt with as circumstances, or political or economic interests, dictate. Not to ensure these rights means quite simply to flout the dignity of persons and to endanger global stability.
- Thirdly, conflict prevention would avoid situations difficult to resolve and would spare much suffering. Appropriate international means are not lacking; they need only to be used, carefully distinguishing, without opposition or separation, between politics, law and morality.
- Lastly, calm dialogue between cultures and religions could favour a new way of thinking and living. Despite their diverse mentalities and beliefs, the men and women of this millennium, in recalling the errors of the past, must learn for the future. This dialogue would also make it possible in the future to avoid arriving at an absurd situation: that of killing others in the name of God.

In recent years there has been much talk of a "new world order". The persevering action of far-sighted diplomats, and of multilateral diplomacy in particular, has resulted in a number of praiseworthy initiatives aimed at the building of an authentic "community of nations".

At present, for example, the Middle East Peace Process is continuing; the Chinese people are speaking to one another; the two Koreas are in dialogue; certain African countries are attempting to arrange meetings between rival factions; the government and armed groups in Colombia are trying to remain in contact.

Closer to home peace still hangs by a thread in Ireland and it is the prayer of all of us that it might be soon put on a sure footing.

All this demonstrates a real desire to build a world based on brotherhood, in order to create, defend and spread peace all around us.

Regrettably, however, we must also acknowledge that the errors of the past are all too often being repeated: I am thinking of persecutions inflicted for religious reasons, of the frequent and at times rash recourse to war, of social inequalities, of the gap between the rich and the poor countries, of the exclusive trust in profit alone, to cite only some typical traits of the century just ended.

At the beginning of the year 2000, looking around the world what do we see?

Africa, shackled by ethnic conflicts which hold entire peoples hostage, impeding their economic and social progress and often condemning them to a situation of mere survival.

The Middle East, constantly poised between war and peace, when we know that only the rule of law and justice will make it possible for all the peoples of the region to live together and to be free of endemic dangers.

Asia, a continent of immense human and material resources, gathers into precarious balance peoples of venerable and economically highly developed cultures and others who are becoming increasingly impoverished.

North America, where economic and political concerns are often considered paramount, is home to many poor people, despite its manifold riches. Alarming in that country is the ever more frequent recourse to the death penalty which is an affront to any civilised society.

Latin America, with a few exceptions, has seen encouraging advances towards democracy, but it remains dangerously crippled by alarming social inequalities, the drug trade, corruption and in some cases movements of armed struggle.

Europe, following the failure of the ideologies, is finally on the way towards unity; it is struggling to meet the two-fold challenge of reconciliation and the democratic integration of former enemies.

Even Europe has not been spared terrible forms of violence, as the recent Balkan crisis and the conflicts of recent weeks in the Caucasus have shown.

Recently I was privileged to take part in the synod of Bishops for Europe, held in Rome. Coming together, we acknowledged the signs of hope, growing openness between peoples, reconciliation between nations, more frequent cooperation and exchange, and called everyone to a greater European consciousness.

But at the same time we issued a plea for a greater support on the part of European nations for the family, for children and for the poor.

Faced with this troubled world, at once magnificent and unstable, I am reminded of a commitment made at the end of the terrible Second World War, which everyone wanted to be the last.

I am speaking of the Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, adopted in San Francisco on 26 June 1945.

It reads: "We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm our faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations, large and small . . . have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims".

This solemn text and this solemn commitment have lost nothing of their force and their timeliness.

They are words I am sure Charles John Cobb would have approved.

In today's world it is indispensable for stability, understanding and cooperation between peoples that international relations be increasingly imbued with and shaped by the rule of law.

What is lacking is not new texts or juridical instruments; it is quite simply the political will to apply without discrimination those already in existence.

In all of this it would be very easy for the ordinary person to feel disenfranchised, somehow unable to contribute in any meaningful way to changing the world for the better.

That understandable sense of hopelessness, however, does not allow Christians to simply do nothing.

There are very practical things we could do which would make our world a more civilised place.

I have two very concrete suggestions, and I have alluded to them already.

One is the challenge to Christians to campaign against the death penalty wherever it is still used.

While the Church has traditionally upheld the right of society to use the ultimate punishment, that right has been recognised as only a last resort. In recent years Pope John Paul has questioned publicly whether, at this stage in history, there is ever really any justification for using capital punishment.

He has appealed publicly for condemned prisoners to be spared.

In Rome, this year, the Coliseum will be illuminated every time a country abolishes the death penalty or a capital prisoner is spared.

Charles John Cobb was in a way a victim of a kind of death sentence. Not for him the noose and the judge's black cap. His condemnation was to a slower form of death. The hard labour he endured broke his health. When he was released he was suffering from curvature of the spine due to being forced to carry coal-bags. He had congestion of the lungs, pleurisy and consumption.

Today, thankfully, in Britain, such atrocious conditions have been banished to the history books.

But elsewhere in the so-called civilised world the death penalty continues to be practised with apparently new enthusiasm.

Let me talk you through a few statistics.

During 1998, 68 persons in 18 States of the USA were executed -- 20 in Texas; 13 in Virginia; 7 in South Carolina; 4 each in Arizona, Florida, and Oklahoma; 3 each in Missouri and North Carolina; and 1 each in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Montana, Nevada, and Washington. Sixty-six of those executed were men and 2 were women.

Sixty of the executions were carried out by lethal injection, 7 by electrocution, and 1 by lethal gas.

Thirty-eight States today still have had capital statutes.

At yearend 1998, 3,452 prisoners in the USA live under sentence of death, 4% more than at yearend 1997.

Forty-eight women were under a sentence of death. At yearend, the youngest inmate under sentence of death was 18; the oldest was 83.

In the year 2000, it seems to me a sign of failure when a modern industrialised society has recourse to killing as a means of enforcing order.

That's the view too of the Catholic Bishops in America, whose policy statement on this issue says this: "We believe that abolition of the death penalty is most consonant with the example of Jesus, who both taught and practiced the forgiveness of injustice ... There is, and has been, a certain sense that even in those cases where serious justifications can be offered for the necessity of taking life, those who are identified in a special way with Christ should refrain from taking life."

I would suggest that one practical measure we could take to honour the memory of Charles Cobb would be to commit ourselves - each in his or her own way - to arguing against the death penalty.

To do so is to argue for a more humane society, one in which the terrible treatment meted out to Cobb 80 years ago (and today meted out to thousands of prisoners in penal institutions all over the world) has no place.

Many of the big human rights charities organise letter writing campaigns, and awareness-raising efforts on this issue.

Even the world of commerce is taking this issue more seriously. The clothes company Benetton - whose advertising in the past has not always been to the Church's liking - has taken to displaying prominently the details of condemned prisoners on their billboard advertising space. Whether this is aimed at boosting sales or raising awareness of the issue is difficult to say. However it does keep very much at the forefront of people's minds the reality of capital punishment today.

There is another area, too, where your voice as civilised citizens can make a difference. Again I touched on this earlier. It is the issue of unpayable debt in the third world.

Mozambique, the country which is at the centre of the world's attention these days, is also one of the most highly indebted nations. There we see an example of how crippling interest payments hamper the development of even the most basic educational and health facilities.

It is greatly to the credit of the UK government that in recent months it has begun the process of writing off the debts of countries shackled by poverty.

The US government has also shown a positive attitude in this regard. But some nations persist in maintaining a strict debt enforcement policy.

I am told that if Germany and Japan could be persuaded to follow the example of the UK and the USA then the issue would make substantial progress.

Again, you might say, what can I do to help?

Once more the answer is in taking up your pen. It is essential to write to or e-mail the Japanese government asking them to put this issue on the agenda for the next meeting of the G8 nations in Tokyo.

Back in Scotland our own Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund this week launches a major Lenten campaign asking people to lobby the Japanese authorities to get them to consider this issue.

For there is no doubt that a concerted and properly organised international policy of lifting unpayable debt burdens would mean the difference between life and death for very many of our brothers and sisters in developing countries.

These are two very simple, but practical suggestions I make to you with a view to making this world of ours a better place in which to live.

We may not face the same agonising choices that Charles Cobb faced 80 years ago, but we still face profound choices, both as individuals and as communities.

If the choice facing us becomes too hard, we opt for the coward's way out - we resort to channel hopping until we find images and words which do not send our conscience into turmoil.

That is the easy way out, but it is not the Christian way out.

Christianity is a religion of difficult choices. Solidarity with those who are suffering is not an optional extra. It was part of the life and activity of Jesus of Nazareth.

Today we need a new generation of conscientious objectors - not objectors to conscription, but objectors to the apathy and indifference which all too often scar our society.

I leave you with words I quote often from the pen of that great poet TS Eliot.

He recognised early on the very real danger of indifference to the demands of faith.

He wrote in Choruses from the Rock:

Where the river flows with foreign fluctuations.
There I was told: we have too many churches
And too few chop-houses. There I was told:
Let the vicars retire. Men do not need the Church
In the place where they work, but where they spend their Sundays.
In the City we need no bells:
Let them waken the suburbs.
I journeyed to the suburbs, and there I was told:
We toil for six days, on the seventh we must ... motor
To Hindhead or Maidenhead.
If the weather is foul we stay at home and read the papers ..."

That picture of society, I think, is more accurate today than it was when it was written. It should inspire us to shake people out of their lethargy and spiritual indifference. We do have a responsibility before God and before our fellow human beings to work for a better world, a world of peace and justice. A world, especially, of solidarity.

My rallying cry to you comes from the same poem I have just quoted:

"There are hands and machines
And clay for new brick
And lime for new mortar
Where the bricks are fallen
We will build with new stone
Where the beams are rotten
We will build with new timbers
Where the word is unspoken
We will build with new speech
There is work together
A Church for all