

**Ethical and Shared Remembering:  
Commemoration in a New Context**

**Lamenting in Hope: A Theology of Trauma and Healing**

**Johnston McMaster  
And  
Cathy Higgins**

**In partnership with**

**Maureen Hetherington  
The Junction**

**Ethical and Shared Remembering Project**

## **Lamenting in Hope: A Theology of Trauma and Healing**

### **Contents:**

1. A Theology of Catastrophe
2. Recovering the Practice of Lament
3. Arguing with God: Job and Human Experience
4. Community Witness to Pain: Lamentations and Public Grief
5. I Cannot Forgive, Not Yet!
6. Who Takes Responsibility for the Past? A Theology of Reparation
7. Restorative Justice and Community Healing
8. After the Dust Settles: Building A Just Peace

## 1. A Theology of Catastrophe

The violent conflict in Northern Ireland left over 3600 dead and more than 40,000 injured. Over 50% of the deaths occurred between 1971-1976 and 33% of injuries between 1972–1977. The early 70's were the worst period of violence, with killing and injuries gradually decreasing during the 80's and 90's. In relation to violent deaths 60% were by shooting and 30% dead by explosion. A litany of atrocities comes to mind with events and place names etched forever on community memory. The more high profile killings are remembered as Bloody Sunday, McGurk's Bar, Oxford Street Bus Station or Bloody Friday, Enniskillen, Greysteele, Loughanisland and Omagh. Others can be added and the trauma is not less because of not being named here. There were single shootings and bombs under cars, and there were the disappearances, some bodies only being recovered in the recent past.

The legacy of the violent conflict is a legacy of trauma and for thousands of people in a small community, every killing was an atrocity and an experience of catastrophe. For many the psychological and physical scars have remained. Psychological trauma and scars have also remained for those who dealt with atrocities; medics, paramedics, fire service personnel and on-duty police officers. The religious ethos of Northern Irish society was also evident in the fact that 99% of funerals of those killed in the violence were conducted by priests and ministers, who also found themselves in the pastoral front line with many of the injured. Northern Ireland is a traumatized society with trauma continuing to express itself in physical, psychological and behavioural ways.

In relation to what happened in other violent conflict regions such as Sarajevo, Northern Ireland was a low-key conflict, yet in proportion to population, no less catastrophic. It was a squalid and sordid little war in which a single killing was one too many. Yet tragically it was in keeping with a centuries old Irish tradition of atrocity. A recent publication has mapped the nature and extent of violence and atrocity in 16th and 17th century Ireland, underlining the brutality of the period, perpetuated by high profile characters such as Hugh O'Neill, Mountjoy and Oliver Cromwell. There were also the scorched earth policies of the Tudors and the violence against settlers during the 1641 rebellion. The violence of the 16th and 17th centuries played itself out again in the early 20th century history of Ireland and repeated itself in the second half of the same century. Modern Ireland has a history of violence, atrocity and catastrophe, which has become an Irish ethos, a destructive spirituality of Ireland, and it needs to be acknowledged and critiqued. There is serious ethical and theological work to be done.

The Bible highlights three major catastrophes, each of which contains high level trauma, and also the potential for new beginnings beyond endings. Without being facile or platitudinous, the biblical story of catastrophe has seeds of hope.

## **The Flood Myth**

Genesis tells the story of a great flood catastrophe, sometimes known as the Noah story. It was not a story unique to the ancient Hebrews. Many flood stories existed among even more ancient neighbours in the near east. They are often associated with creation stories and also highlight the imperfections of the world. These are best described as myths, profound stories trying to express profound truth about shared human existence. The ancient Hebrews borrowed and adapted an earlier flood myth. It helped to make sense of their traumatic experience as a people, living under the violence and tyranny of god-like Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian leaders. Oppression, genocide and scorched earth politics characterised repeated catastrophes experienced by the people of ancient Israel. The Bible is a story of trauma, atrocity and catastrophe, and of a people who were perpetual victims.

The Genesis flood myth is a reflection on catastrophe, which is at the same time a reflection on ancient Israel's historical experience. The key insight of the myth is earth corruption (Genesis 6 v 12). This wickedness in the extreme is named as violence. Human violence has reached such a level that human community and earth are destroyed and life is corrupted. Violence, bloodshed, oppression and physical and psychological force corrupts values, structures and what is good, and is destructive of community, lives, property and the environment. Violence corrupts and destroys and in the myth the evil of violence creates a crisis in Godself. To put it mildly in anthropomorphic terms, violence utterly depresses God. The conflict in God is such that God destroys the creation, except for one of every species, including a human family. Read literally, which is impossible when reading myth, God is also violent. But this is profound myth and the point is that violence brings its own judgement through its destruction of hope, values and environment. It creates catastrophe and results in chaos in human lives and in community. Like all creative myths the flood myth is about the violence in our own tragic experience. To those who suffer violence, there is personal and family chaos, the world falls apart and trauma shatters meaning.

Yet the flood myth includes a rainbow, a symbol of hope, and a new beginning is possible through a covenant made between humans, animals and all life forms. In the catastrophic ending there are seeds of new beginning.

## **Babylonian Exile**

The second biblical story of catastrophe is the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the exile of key community leaders and people in Babylon. This defining historical experience, reflected in Jeremiah, Ezekiel and a number of the Psalms such as Psalm 137, is also the experience reflected in the flood myth. Myth explores deep questions of meaning and this Hebrew version of an earlier neighbouring myth gives symbolic expression to the inside story of the exile experience. It is in exile that the flood myth took its final shape and form.

In the real life experience of the people of Judah, the exile was a catastrophic event. It was the collapse of an entire world. The Babylonian superpower was a threat from the day it

crushed the Assyrians. The small kingdom of Judah was geographically and politically trapped in violent geopolitics. Judah was crucial to the trade routes of any near-east superpower. In 587 BCE, for a second time the Babylonian military machine arrived, having threatened a decade earlier, now ruthlessly set about the utter destruction of this small, powerless kingdom. The city, its walls and Temple were razed to the ground and the poorest were left to somehow survive in the rubble. Their trauma was voiced in the book of Lamentations. The key and better off members of the community were marched off into exile, also traumatised by their forced removal to a foreign land by the rivers of Babylon, where they sat down and wept.

Babylonian conquest was a total catastrophe. Judah's social, political, psychological, spiritual and cultural worlds had collapsed. There were no symbols of meaning and identity left and even their God had been crushed by the Babylonian empire. Their trauma and anguish was so deep that they longed for every Babylonian child to be crushed (Psalm 137 v 8-9). Only such brutal violence wiping out the future of the empire would do for pay back.

The experience was one of complete dislocation and chaos, loss of meaning and identity. Yet somehow this catastrophic ending opened up new possibilities. Exile became a time of emerging creativity. The Hebrew Bible as we have it today emerged out of the earlier and post-exilic experience. Poets such as the unknown II Isaiah (Chs 40-55) creatively imagined a new sense of identity and purpose. God was re-imagined and re-visioned and the community emerged from exile with new images of God. Out of the catastrophe, Judaism was born, identity and purpose re-expressed in a new exodus or experience of liberation and new covenant, and a new, more radical and equality-based way of being community was shaped.

### **The Cross as Imperial Execution**

The third catastrophic event in the Bible is the event of the death of Jesus. Medieval theories of the death of Jesus or atonement have by-passed the historical reality of crucifixion. The violence of the cross has been transferred from Roman imperial power to God, whose honour or anger requires the violent death of Jesus to appease. Letting the Romans off the hook for the violence of crucifixion has let every empire since off the hook for its brutal violence in conquest and colonisation. It allows domination systems to justify their violence.

Any attempt to understand the meaning of the cross needs to begin with historical reality. Crucifixion was state torture, brutality, violence and terrorism. It was the empire's way of dealing with subversives and insurrectionists. The violence of crucifixion was not only a deterrent, but for the empire, the way to peace. Peace through war and violence was the working motto of imperial power then and now. The Romans crucified thousands of Galileans and Judeans, as they did thousands more across the empire. Jesus was executed by the Roman occupying power. One of his friends betrayed him to that violent power, perhaps hoping that Jesus might be forced to lead a counter-violence movement. His friends deserted him out of fear of the empire's violent strategy. Luke portrays their experience as shattered dreams and hopes, a future not merely deferred, but destroyed. They thought he

might be the person to liberate Israel from Roman occupation and domination (Luke 24 v 21). The execution of Jesus by state terrorism and violence was experienced as catastrophic by the women and men close to him. To describe them as traumatized is an understatement. The cross was not a religious symbol but one of state violence. We distort the death of Jesus if we deny its reality in history.

Yet this catastrophic end became a beginning. The women were the first to discover the new beginning and were the first to carry the good news to fearful men who had fled the scene of the catastrophe. The new beginning was called resurrection, an experience of energies for the new beginning. Christian faith witnesses to resurrection and resurrection simply means 'rising up again'. It is rising up from the catastrophe to new life with new hope and a new future. In terms of the Jesus story the murderers or executors had no final triumph over their victims.

Yet, there is no piety of easy triumph in relation to the experience of catastrophe. Mark's Gospel is realistic about this. It is after all, a war-time document written during the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70 CE. It was written for a traumatized faith community. The catastrophe is such that Jesus experiences utter abandonment and there is hardly a mention of the resurrection. The Gospel ends in fear even with the hint of '*rising or standing up again*'. We are often in too much of a hurry to get from the catastrophe of Friday to the '*happy ending*' of Easter day. The rainbow of hope, new creativity and new beginning are all possible out of catastrophe, but not quickly, easily, or without the fear of Mark's realism and war-zone ending.

### **Reflection Questions**

- The flood myth portrays the destructiveness of violence. Where in the experiences of violence do we find the rainbow of hope?
- The catastrophe of exile was a shattering of meaning and experience of chaos, yet it became an experience of creativity and new beginning. How did this happen?
- Reflect on the execution of Jesus as catastrophe and how Mark's resurrection story offers no piety of easy triumph. How is this reflected in human experience?

## 2. Recovering the Practice of Lament

A few years ago the last surviving soldier of World War 1 died. Harry Patch was 107 years old. Harry never spoke of his wartime experiences until he was 100. For all of those years his traumatic experiences were repressed and denied. At 100 years of age Harry began to visit schools and tell his story, but more significantly he was determined to get across his conviction about the obscenity and waste of war and his strong advocacy of peace and of peaceful means of resolving international disputes. We used to say of many old soldiers whom we met or knew that they never talked about it. They never spoke of it because of the terrible things they experienced and more importantly, because of the terrible things they did as trench soldiers. They returned to civilian life with appalling memories, haunting nightmares and guilt, brutalised minds and traumatised lives. There was no language of trauma, nor was post-traumatic stress disorder a recognised condition.

It is now, not only for ex-soldiers of war and conflict, but for many, who as combatants and non-combatants, experienced the violence and pain of 35 years of conflict in Northern Ireland. There are many traumatised people in our community as a result of over three decades of violent conflict. This is also a tragic legacy transferring its trauma and pain with accompanying hate and violence to a new generation.

Faith communities are potentially communities of healing and public reconciliation, but struggle to know how to respond. There is even denial and avoidance, a pretence that the decades of violence never happened, or that the war is over, so let's get back to business as usual with our spiritualised gospel or traditional sacramentalism. Much of this is escapism and denial. Yet there are resources in the faith story and tradition that can enable healing and public reconciliation to take place. It is these resources that we now need to recover, or maybe even discover for the first time.

At the heart of the Jewish Christian tradition is the practice of lament. Its roots are deep in Ancient Israel's prayer and liturgy and it is a voicing of deep pain and trauma, a wrestling with personal, social and political catastrophe and the suffering and trauma of very concrete life experiences. It might even be said that the Bible is an ongoing story of innocent suffering, the story of a victim community at the hands of one empire or superpower after another. Much of what is written in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures is the struggle to make sense, find meaning, or at least survive intense injustice, suffering and trauma. We are perhaps more familiar with Ancient Israel's songs of praise, the psalms which give voice to praise, thanksgiving and gratitude for the beauty of the earth and the goodness of God. What we have often failed to notice are the psalms of lament, and we have rarely, if ever, noticed that there are many more psalms of lament than psalms of praise. Lament is central to Israel's prayer and liturgy and is an integral part of living spirituality.

These are the Psalms that give voice to pain and trauma, unanswerable questions, deep hurt and anger. They shout and argue with God, accuse God of not caring, of great injustices and unfairness. They fling massive 'why' questions at God and charge God with cruelty and violence. They shout against the silence of God and the absence of God. These Psalms worship and pray when there are no answers and no God, just a deafening silence and God-forsakenness. Yet this is prayer and liturgy. The language is brutal, sometimes violent, raw and urgent, critical and accusatory. It is a language of prayer and liturgy which lets it all hang out. Sometimes a lament ends with no sense of hope, just hopelessness and despair. Yet this is prayer, it is an act of faith because faith is the voicing of hopelessness and despair. Real faith is arguing with God, hurling personal and social anger at life. Some Psalms of lament even give voice to deep longings for vengeance and revenge. If we bother to read Psalm 137 in worship we usually edit out the last few verses. The pop song of another era familiarised us with the beginning of the Psalm, "*by the rivers of Babylon- there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion...How could we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*" Here a community voices its experience of catastrophe, the exile in Babylon, which shattered identity, faith community and everything. How can you sing in an experience of trauma? Yet in contemporary church we cannot cope with the end lines of this lament. "*O daughter Babylon, you devastator!...Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!*" Such brutal longing for vengeance offends our respectable, escapist religion. We would never pray like this or voice such revenge in public worship. And that's our big problem, our prayer and worship has become so polite and spends so much time running away from real life, real pain and trauma, real human and raw experience. Our prayer and worship excludes much of our real life experience and our honest to God deepest feelings. Our churches have successfully eliminated lament from public liturgy and worship. What often passes for worship is selling people short, encouraging human beings to deny their painful life experiences.

If we want to struggle with the traumas of our violent conflict experience then we do well to recover the practice of lament, to find language, rituals and symbols that voice pain, trauma, despair, unanswerable questions, God forsakenness and longings for vengeance. The biblical resources are there. The Book of Job presents faith in an experience of personal and communal catastrophe and trauma, as a continuous argument with God. Lamentations is the community lament of those who are left in the political, economic, social and spiritual rubble of Jerusalem. It is the book of liturgy which uses violent metaphors before God in the absence of God. The book of Revelation, far from being a series of predictions of the end of the world, is supremely a book of liturgy with worship language that offends our sensibilities by its violent language, metaphors and symbols, yet this is Christian lament. "*How long O Lord?*" is a cry of lament "*Babylon has fallen,*" is the hope for the collapse of an unjust military and economic system. Lament is essentially a cry for justice from a people

traumatised from the injustice of violence, repression and domination.

We would rather forget suffering, draw a line under the past, let bygones be bygones. But that is to forget the traumatised and the victims. We have no shared future if we ignore or repress the memory of a violent past. There will be no social and political reconciliation unless we can overcome denial and honour the voices of the traumatised.

### **Reflection Questions**

- How might our churches, together and separately, publicly lament the devastation, suffering and loss that resulted from sectarian violence and hatred over the last 35 years?
- Can you suggest language, symbols and rituals that might be used to give voice to people's experiences of trauma, suffering and anger?

## **2. Arguing with God: Job and Human Experience**

Much of the intense suffering in Northern Ireland has been innocent suffering, experienced by victims and survivors who have neither been involved in violent organisations, nor supported the physical force traditions. Those proponents of violence who viewed the maiming and murders as 'collateral damage', an unfortunate consequence of war, exacerbated the trauma of victims and survivors who were struggling with why questions. *Why me; why our family; why us?*

The experience of trauma can often shatter one's view of the world and one's God images. Those who cannot reconcile belief in God with a personal or communal experience of inexplicable, innocent suffering, understandably, can turn their backs on religion and religious practice. It is no longer possible to believe in a loving, just God, or fair world. Life instead is experienced as brutal and cruel, and God as intolerable, if existing at all.

Some of those traumatised by violence have raised a critical question concerning the validity and helpfulness of an image of God as righteous judge, who punishes the evildoer. They rightly demand to know why this God of justice did not intervene to stop the violence; or save the innocent victim/survivor! Their response is faith in action as is demonstrated in the biblical book of Job.

This book, named after the protagonist, is an imaginative story that explores the ethical

issue of innocent suffering. It is a quest story, as Job is searching for answers that will explain his acute suffering. Job's life changes dramatically when he loses the very things closest to his heart that gave his life meaning and defined his world; namely, prosperity, family, and health.

Job's struggle to make sense of these losses, in light of his theological worldview, forms the crux of his story. Job's dialogue with his friends, and eventually with God, provides the platform for his search for meaning.

Central to the community understanding of justice Job has inherited, is a belief that true justice is punitive and retributive. God will, therefore, ultimately punish those who are evil and reward those who are good. This perspective divides the world up in terms of those who are right and those who are wrong.

Job's friends embody this viewpoint. They sit in mourning with Job for the week following the loss of his children and attempt to offer comfort. They give traditional responses to Job's heart-broken pleas for answers. They account for his suffering from within their own framework of meaning. His suffering is punishment for sin, his own or his children's; something to be borne in the confidence that God will eventually restore well-being. *"Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?"* (Job 4 v 7).

They act as foils to Job who, convinced of his own innocence and that his suffering is not a result of any wrong-doing, castigates his friends as *"miserable comforters"* (Job 16 v 2). Their traditional responses, like 'clanging symbols,' are hollow sounding in the face of Job's intense grief and honest searching. His response, refusing consolation, is Job's way of protesting his situation.

Job's experience of suffering has neither rhyme nor reason to it. It is inexplicable nonsensical suffering, the ultimate experience of chaos. Job grieves his loss in the whole of his body. *"By night pain pierces my very bones, and there is ceaseless throbbing in my veins,"* (Job 30: 17). It is from this experience that Job challenges and argues with God.

I will give free utterance to my complaint;  
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.  
I will say to God. Do not condemn me;  
Let me know why you contend against me (Job 10: 1-2).

It took Job a while to realise that raging at God, in the face of inexplicable suffering, was okay. In fact he might still have been sitting with his boils and sores if he had not come round to Mrs. Job's way of thinking. *"Curse God and die,"* (Job 2:9), she told him early in the

book. She is in the biblical tradition of those women who railed at their innocent suffering. Like Rachel, she too weeps for her children and refuses to be comforted.

A primary cause of Job's pain and frustration is an inability to understand God's motives. Why do the wicked prosper while the innocent are abused? That being the case, how can he continue to trust in God's justice, righteousness and moral governance of the world? Job demands that God defend God's actions.

Oh, that I knew where I might find him,  
that I might come even to his dwelling!  
I would lay my case before him,  
and fill my mouth with arguments.  
I would learn what he would answer me,  
and understand what he would say to me. (Job 23 vv 3-5)

Job's suffering brings him face to face with the possibility that perhaps God may not be in total control. Job is forced to face his greatest fear that within creation chaos is restrained but never fully eliminated. And if chaos is not eliminated, how can any human or created being, protect his or her life and that of families and friends, from suffering and chaos? This is Job's struggle, and this too is our struggle.

In the book of Job, then, it is God who is on trial. But God does not take any responsibility for the sufferings that have broken Job. Instead God affirms the power of creation and recreation; points up that the dawn returns each day and animals are nurtured. There is an order to things. Yet how does God's delight in creation answer Job's question about innocent human suffering? Rather than answer directly in the final chapters, God refers to the Leviathan, the monster of chaos. This chaos exists within creation and is neither contained nor subdued.

The book of Genesis affirms that God did not create from nothing but from the mass of undifferentiated chaos, which sometimes breaks its bounds (Genesis 1: 1-2). There is within creation, then, an untameable force that is unpredictable. Yet God released the potential in this undifferentiated mass to realise its form, confident of the goodness and integrity of creation.

Is the book of Job affirming the Genesis perspective that God risks uncertainty for the sake of an open-ended future? Is all of creation vulnerable to chaos, the great Leviathan that can cause mayhem? Is suffering, therefore, an inevitable part of the fabric of creation? Or, as American feminist Catherine Keller, put it:

Is this the truth of the whirlwind: that God, the 'spirit of the world-wind,' does not will our suffering – but does will a world, a living, whirling, open system of a world?  
(Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process*, p. 76)

What we do learn from the book of Job is that Job's grieving, raging and questioning are the prelude to a new perspective on life, justice, suffering and God.

Job comes to the realisation that he has imprisoned God within his own punitive worldview. In his anguish and struggle he begins to remake his moral world, to perceive the world differently, and to perceive God differently.

Job's quest for wisdom and truth has led him to reject the traditional view of God as a god of domination, control and judgement. We are left with the image of a God who works with the chaos to create the universe but does not attempt to contain nor fully control the chaos. Whether this is God's choice or God's renunciation of absolute power we do not know. But there is the biblical theme of God's vulnerability and therefore our vulnerability. The book of Job ends without definitive answers. Yet somehow, in the midst of his trauma, Job affirms that the God of solidarity lives and will not let Job go.

What we have in the book of Job is faith arguing with God. Job discovers that faith is not being good for the sake of what we get out of it. Faith is not unquestioning loyalty, passivity or blind obedience. Faith is, however, being good for goodness sake, arguing with God, the courage to live in the face of inexplicable or innocent suffering. Faith is rejecting whatever is oppressive or dehumanising. And faith gives courage to search for the truth and speak the truth even when it contradicts the traditional view of things. The continuous argument with God paradoxically becomes liberating for Job and finds expression in heartfelt prayer before God. At the book's end, Job acknowledges the limitations of human knowledge before the divine mystery that is God. Arguing with God and about God gives way to prayer and supplication to God.

It may be that the story of Job was told to try and make sense of an inexplicable community experience of suffering. The Hebrew people were invaded and crushed by the armies of the Babylonian superpower. They were forced into exile in a strange land, the victims of a domination system. It was an experience of chaos, innocent suffering, and injustice. Some tried to explain it as God's punishment for sin, but within the community there were those who refused to believe that. It was too simplistic, too neat, even an unethical view of God. So the story of Job arguing with God in the midst of his innocent suffering and chaos becomes a story of the community's struggle in their suffering and chaos. At the heart of Job's argument with God there is a cry for justice and well-being. The cry itself, in the midst of suffering, requires an ethical response, a practical caring outcome from the community to

support those who are suffering.

The book of Job unmasks the meaninglessness and despair of innocent suffering. It confirms that anger at the injustice of innocent suffering is an ethical response. It refuses to accept easy answers about suffering and God, which avoid grappling with the reality of grief and pain of loss. The book of Job deftly illustrates that an ongoing argument with God is faithful praying, faithful living and faithful hoping. This is the wisdom in the story, the insight gained at the end of the quest. The book of Job may well be a valuable resource for those struggling with trauma and faith in Northern Ireland.

### **Reflection Questions**

- What predominant images of God does the book of Job challenge?
- Are there lessons to be learned from Job about the role of faith in the context of innocent suffering?

## **4. COMMUNITY WITNESS TO PAIN: LAMENTATIONS AND PUBLIC GRIEF**

Major public catastrophes are often followed by communal expressions of grief such as national days of mourning. The sense of trauma is such that some public ritual is needed to focus grief and provide for a shared outpouring that enables catharsis. Without the communal expression, grief and anger are repressed, often resurfacing with destructive effect, and producing a communal apathy which is frozen anger.

After the terrible events of Bloody Sunday in Derry/Londonderry, the Republic of Ireland government declared a national day of mourning in which churches of all denominations held special services to ritualise the grief and anger. After the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bomb a remembrance service was held attended by a higher profile congregation than the tragically disrupted service, and given global television coverage. The event provided a very public focus for grief. On the Saturday after the Omagh bomb, towns and villages all over Ireland held prayer services in public spaces, not only offering an island-wide solidarity with the families of those who died and suffered, but providing a public space to express grief and anger. These public rituals and gestures were essential and important.

The book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible is concerned with public grief. It is not an individual expression of grief, but a community witness to unimaginable pain. The context is catastrophe in the immediacy of the year 587 BCE when the superpower of the day, Babylon crushed the small kingdom of Judah and razed the city of Jerusalem and its Temple to the ground. It was a major catastrophe which shattered all of a community's symbols of meaning. It was a crisis at a number of levels, political, social, economic, psychological and spiritual. Not only was a community and its infrastructure crushed, so too

were its identity and belief and value systems. Traditional politics and faith had assured these people that the city and its Temple would never be destroyed. No less than God had pledged, they were told, the inviolability of their holy city and sacred space. God had promised that David's Kingdom was an everlasting one. So Kings and prophets had said. Now it was total devastation. So much for the eternal city, Temple and God!

The more wealthy and better educated people were taken away into exile into Babylon. Their cry of desolation is heard in Psalm 137 by the rivers of Babylon, where they sat down and wept. Those exiled in Babylon were only about 10% of Judah's population. The 90% were left among the dust and rubble of Jerusalem and they were the poor, left with even less than before the Babylonians arrived with their powerful military. It is the pained voice of the poor which is heard in Lamentations. These are the laments of those who remained among the ruins attempting to carry on some level of prayer and ritual on a pile of rubble. Their psychological and spiritual experience was one of disillusionment with the Davidic dynasty and with the corrupt leadership of politicians, priests and prophets. The experience is one of loss and ending. They have lost everything and their world has ended and their series of funeral dirges and laments concludes in total disbelief and hopelessness.

*Why have you forgotten us completely?  
Why have you forsaken us these many days?  
Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored  
Renew our days as of old –  
Unless you have utterly rejected us,  
And are angry with us beyond measure (Lamentations 5 v 20-22).*

Lamentations is the heartbreaking cry of loss and grief by people who have experienced war. Not only does the book highlight the horror and futility of all war and violence, it portrays the experience of women in particular through devastating violence. In a culture where women were the official mourners, women may well have authored part of this book. Whoever its authors, and they were closely identified with the experience of the people, they helped people to weep over their tragedy and grieve over their loss and pain. Unique to their style of writing was poetry arranged in the first four poems in acrostic style, each line in each poem beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In other words, this is the A-Z of community grief, the totality of pain and loss. Funeral dirges, heartbreaking laments, imagery of brutally abused women as metaphors for the city, an expression of utter abandonment, what is a book like Lamentations trying to say and why does it provide language, symbols and ritual beyond the catastrophe of 587 BCE? Lamentations is poetry with paradigmatic power. No one highlights the themes of Lamentations better than Kathleen O'Connor (Lamentations and the Tears of the World, Orbis Books, 2002, p124-136).

### **Truth-telling Matters**

There is no truth if pain cannot speak and worship for ancient Judah was not worship if pain was denied, belittled or excluded. Prayer was not pious platitudes but the community voice of desperation abandoned to truth. Even when they feel that God has done down-right evil

against them, it is still voiced in worship and prayer. To repress pain, grief and loss is untruthful. To belittle pain, grief and loss at the hands of war and violence is untruthful. For the poets of Lamentations truth-telling mattered.

### **Impassioned Hope**

Though those poets feel that God has rejected them in the rubble of the city and their lives, they persist in trying to engage God or arguing with things as they are. God may be experienced as hidden, having slammed closed the door, but they continue to berate God, protest and plead for life. The paradox of the poetry is that hope is in the brokenness, the weeping and the desolate grief. Even in the ending there is hope that will not let go or give up. They will insist on a future.

### **Demand for Justice**

Laments are loud, public and angry cries that things are not right. The experience of devastation, loss and grief is not how the world is meant to be. Lament names the warped, fractured, dysfunctional and broken communal relationships, personal, political, domestic, national. Nor is lament the community confessing what is wrong with them but publicly naming the wrong done to them. Injustice of war and violence is named along with fear and anger. Lamentations opens up spaces for the community to recognise what is wrong, the possibility for catharsis and voices the demand for justice.

### **Acting Politically**

In the destruction and rubble of the city, Lamentations gives voice to the tears and outrage of a suffering community. Their grief and loss has a concrete political context. Their suffering has been caused by geopolitics and the domination system of militarism and violence. Lament in a political context is a political act against the politics of violence from whatever source. The tears are not a sign of weakness, but of strength and validate the story and experience of those who suffer. Lamentations validates tears and tears are part of the process of healing. To lament publically is to act politically.

### **A Spirit of Resistance**

To lament is to resist. In Lamentations this even challenges God's governance of the world, refusing to accept that God intervenes and fixes everything. Catastrophes happen and God does nothing. In the face of traditional and often simplistic beliefs, people of faith become good atheists. More than a spirit of resistance towards bad theologies, Lamentations is an act of resistance to every inappropriate use of power. Not only is an '*all powerful*' deity resisted, but all expressions of power as domination or as power over are resisted. Violence and exploitation, social, political or personal are challenged and resisted through lament.

Lamentations, therefore, opens up the possibility of healing and newness. By honestly engaging with lament, Lamentations refuses denial, practices truth-telling and reverses amnesia. It voices the effects of trauma, loss and grief beyond tears. God is absent, yet the

brutal lament is itself an act of faith. Lamentations gives primacy to the pain and trauma of suffering. The book is a Jewish gift that enables us to go beyond denial and despair and to be appropriately open to newness of life and community. Lamentations is read on one day of the year in the Jewish calendar, marking the day when Jerusalem was utterly destroyed. No doubt the poetry also helps to voice the catastrophe of the Shoah or Holocaust. In the Northern Ireland context of loss and grief there is an urgency about recovering lament at the heart of spirituality and prayer and recovering the candid and honest practice of lament from the Jewish community. Lamentations should have a central place in our worship. It is for the many who live with trauma, untold sorrow, grief and doubt.

### **Reflection Questions**

- Do we need a Sunday in the year when the faith community reads Lamentations and voices public lament for the suffering and trauma of the years of violence? If, as a community, we cannot lament, can we ever have hope for the future?
- In paying attention to Lamentations, are we better equipped to resist social, political and personal violence and exploitation?

## **5. I CANNOT FORGIVE, NOT YET?**

In a society traumatized by violence, killing and disappearances, forgiveness is a highly emotive word. There are those who have somehow found a way to forgive and they have been condemned for it. Others do not feel the word or action is appropriate. Some prefer the word healing, while others say they could not ever forgive. Yet others say they cannot forgive and then add, not yet. This seems to indicate for the person the recognition that some day, forgiveness may be possible, but that at present they are not ready or able to take such a step. At another level some who have been involved in acts of violence react negatively to forgiveness because it implies a judgement, that a moral wrong took place, when the wounding or killing was an act of war. This becomes an attempt to justify the violence or legitimize it. Yet others will point out that though they take responsibility for actions, the violence experienced in Northern Ireland was something in which many were implicit, including bystanders and institutions, remaining silent, being ambivalent, or actively encouraging through words, policies and attitudes of hatred, sectarianism and bigotry. Forgiveness, therefore, is something more complex than interpersonal, one to another.

In a violent conflict situation, forgiveness is emotive and complex and it cannot become, though it often does, moralism or legalism. Condemnation of those who do forgive or those who cannot or will not, is unjust and harsh. Forgiveness cannot be demanded, nor can it be dismissed, and it cannot be turned on and off like a tap. Northern Ireland has experienced amazing acts of forgiveness, and also words of premature forgiveness uttered under media pressure or emotional instability, which have later been regretted. There are others too who

believe that actions are so vile and evil that only God can forgive and that forgiveness is something beyond human capacity. Clearly a moralistic or legalistic approach to forgiveness is out of place in a human and pastoral context, especially when the expectation or demand is made by those who have not suffered.

## **Forgiveness in Christianity**

The Christian faith has always underscored forgiveness. In its early creedal formations it became an article of faith, "*we believe in the forgiveness of sins*". Yet in practice, forgiveness has often become captive to pietism and sacramentalism. In enlightenment and modernist thought it has become highly individualistic. God forgives the individual sinner and the vertical relationship is restored. This is not necessarily untrue but it is very partial and limited. Experienced in this way in religious conversion and sacrament, the horizontal and social, relational dimension is often overlooked. Christian faith needs to recover, articulate and practice forgiveness as a social and political dynamic. It is easier to handle as a religious idea, but much more difficult to embody and practice in social and political relationships. Yet it was in this socio-political context that Jesus taught the practice of forgiveness.

The Hebrew Bible which was the only scripture Jesus had as a Jew, is full of political references. Politics and geopolitics form the foreground and the same can be said of the Gospel stories. The Gospels were written in the shadow of the Roman Empire, tyrant Jewish kings and corrupt, abusive religious priests. Not surprisingly the Gospels are full of conflict stories as Jesus took on the domination systems and frequently taught his followers through word and action, a radically alternative use of power as servanthood. Jesus took his cue from his own Jewish scriptures and their Jewish experience of God. He did form a community, more a movement than an institution, which was characterized by its alternativeness and counter-cultural practice. At its heart it was to embody alternative relationships through different forms of power, leadership and humane connections. The Jesus movement threatened and disturbed the religious and political leadership of Roman dominated Judea. Any approach to forgiveness as taught by Jesus needs to be placed in this political context, including the social and personal trauma, poverty and sickness of a violent, colonised society.

Though forgiveness has featured large in Christian tradition and theology, it was by no means dominant in the teachings of Jesus. Taking the gospels as a whole, there are few texts or passages dealing with the practice of forgiveness. These have, though, become privileged texts and have given a more dominant impression of the theme than it actually had. Jesus pronounces God's forgiveness in Mark 2 v1-12, which is paralleled in Luke 7 v 36-50. The well known forgiveness petition of the Lord's prayer is in Mathew 6 v 12 and

Luke 11 v 4, and Mathew has a parable on forgiveness in 18v23-35. Forgiveness features in the parable of the lost son in Luke 15 and in the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18 v 9-14. These are significant teachings of Jesus in the early Jesus movement, but they cannot again be said to be dominant in the early community memory. Perhaps this provides a healthy model in a traumatized society such as Northern Ireland struggling to move beyond implicit violence and through pain and hurt. Forgiveness is not the only theme, it has a place, though as in the Gospels not a dominant place. There are other dynamic themes which need attention and implementation. This places forgiveness in a more healthy perspective and reduces the moralism and legalism that too often have surrounded it.

The Jewish scriptures of Jesus provide another healthy insight and connection. In the Hebrew bible there are texts in which God is unable and unwilling to forgive. (Deuteronomy 29 v 20, II Kings 24 v 4 and Lamentations 5 v 22) These are extreme situations and reflect Deuteronomic theological reflection on the structure of the Jerusalem monarchy. Yet later prophets declare these extreme wrongs forgiven (Isaiah 40 v 1-2, 55 v 7, Jeremiah 31 v 34, Ezekiel 36 v 22-33). It would be wrong to read the earlier texts as a once-and-for-all divine principle, but rather to read the earlier texts in the light of the later ones as God's "*not yet*". Even God, as the Hebrew prophets imagined, had the experience of not being able to forgive, not yet. There is a healthy pastoral potential in this prophetic insight which can deal with the guilt induced by religious moralism and legalism, and enable hurting people to realize that not yet is spiritually and humanly appropriate.

### **Forgiveness in Practice**

Having a more healthy pastoral perspective on forgiveness, its role in social and political relations can be impacted. Kenneth Kaunda was the political leader of Zambia who included forgiveness in his politics. He had three important insights which may help in our struggle to move through our trauma, community building and political relationships.

- Forgiveness is not the same as a pardon. It is the constant willingness to live in a new day without looking back and ransacking the memory for bitterness and resentment.
- Forgiveness is not a substitute for justice. Forgiveness and the perpetuation of injustice is fiction and justice without forgiveness is null and void.
- The power of forgiveness liberates people from the burden of past guilt and enables them to act boldly in the present.

Kaunda's approach to forgiveness goes beyond morality and religion. Forgiveness is about one's well being and sanity. (Transforming Violence: Linking greatest block Local and Global Peacemaking edited by Robert and Judy Zimmerman Herr, Herald Press, 1998, p 72).

In Kaunda's perspective, forgiveness is not allowing ourselves to be dominated and controlled by the past, but holding together forgiveness and social justice and allowing forgiveness to liberate us from the past with a new day and way of community building.

The faith community, though, struggles with forgiveness and its traditional beliefs, often punitive, may well be the greatest block in Northern Ireland to the practice of forgiveness. This also is rooted in a misunderstanding of forgiveness. This is seen in the assumption that forgiving is forgetting, but if we forget the past we forget ourselves. To forget is to be unable to forgive and close off liberation for ourselves and the wrongdoer. Forgiveness is only possible in remembering. Carter Heyward offers a helpful understanding of forgiveness and its importance morally, pastorally, psychologically and politically. (*Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*, Fortress Press, 1999, p178-189).

- Forgiveness is the letting go of resentment and shame that has resulted from wrongdoing, our own and theirs. It is a creating, liberating, life-giving aspiration.
- Forgiveness is a social, political and psychological leap out of the past towards the future. It is a passage through obsession with wrongs done.
- Forgiveness is the letting go of resentment over what has been done in order to get on with life. We forgive as much for ourselves, our own well-being, as for others.
- Forgiveness is the spiritual act of moving on, of not letting betrayals, violence or pain continue to define us.
- Forgiveness is a matter of not forgetting. Indeed, it is a matter of remembering as clearly as possible what took place and only then of being able, possibly, to begin to let it go rather than continue to be defined by it.

Heyward then lists and expands on some very particular, indispensable roots and resources for the practice of forgiveness.

- Building of solidarity through community and friendship
- Involvement in the struggle for justice – love
- Compassion and humility
- Capacity to be honest with ourselves
- Imagination
- Prayer and meditation

These, she believes, are generated by the sacred spirit and in this same forgiveness is a spiritual practice. This does not mean that forgiveness is the monopoly of institutional religion or spirituality. The faith community needs to, and can engage with, the secular community since forgiveness is a human act and the sacred spirit or energy has never been confined to the religious. It may even be that forgiveness needs to be liberated from forms of religion.

The practice of forgiveness cannot be isolated from other dynamics and practices. Forgiveness and justice belong together as do the practices of forgiveness and compassion. Compassion is the concrete, practical suffering with the other. And the practice of non-violence is the heart of compassion, not as passive but as practical action and commitment not to harm our enemies or those perceived to be our enemies. More positively, as Jesus embodied and taught his movement in the political context of Roman imperialism and militarism, and in the abusive, oppressive world of religious politics, love of enemy is the taking of moral responsibility and seeking the enemies highest good. Learning to practice forgiveness, which is a life-long process, is to be liberated into compassionate, active non-violent living, which becomes the way to personal and community well-being.

### **Questions for reflection**

- Has traditional Christianity exaggerated the role of forgiveness and/or turned it into moralism and legalism?
- What have Kaunda's insights to offer our struggle to build social and political relationships?
- What are the pastoral and psychological benefits of forgiveness as a life practice?

## **6. WHO TAKES RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PAST? A THEOLOGY OF REPARATION**

Catastrophe and trauma were experienced by many people during the decade of change and violence, 1912-1922, and in the most recent phase of violence and conflict that began in 1969. Both periods of violence were subsequently characterised by a blame game which was and still is more about claims of innocence. Or the transference of blame or guilt becomes a way of justifying the violence of our own group. There is the tendency to claim violence as defensive or the protection of "our people" or community. The language of victim and perpetrator is unsatisfactory and even unacceptable to some of those who suffered and to those whose actions were responsible for suffering. Even where wrong is acknowledged there is reluctance to use victim/perpetrator categories, which may be seen as diminishing the suffering of those who lost loved ones or who were seriously injured by shooting or explosion. The complexity of it all is underlined by the possibility that perpetrators may also be victims and victims might be perpetrators.

Some of those who were responsible for acts of violence have acknowledged responsibility but also claim that others also need to take responsibility for the kind of society that created

violence. Politicians and churches share responsibility for the sectarianism out of which violence erupted, on average every ten years in the north-east of Ireland especially, since the early 1800's. Paramilitaries, loyalist and republican, between them responsible for most of the deaths and injuries of the most recent violence, did not exist in isolation. The IRA and UVF were not islands. Those active and involved were the products of history, politics, education and religion, and therefore from the perspective of many of them, not exclusively responsible for the killing and destruction.

Any analysis of why we are a violent society and why we experienced what we did has got to wrestle with complexity. To simply blame the British or the IRA, or the loyalists for the past is too simplistic. What makes claims of innocence unacceptable is the complexity of being in society together, the collective nature of being human. To be sure the British, republicans and loyalists all committed acts of terror and were responsible for what may be described as murders, but this does not excuse the many more bystanders who often remained silent or did nothing. The majority were still sectarian and attitudes and prejudices were often taken to their logical conclusion by those who chose to take up arms or plant bombs. There may well be such a thing as collective guilt. Yehuda Bauer, a modern Jewish historian writing in the context of the holocaust has said: "*Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander*" (Quoted in Donald Shriver, *An Ethic For Enemies. Forgiveness in Politics*, 1995, p 73)

Human dignity as well as freedom means taking personal responsibility for the past, the acknowledgement of sectarian attitudes and behaviours, as well as acquiescence in the violence of the state or paramilitary organisations. Most may deny any role in the catastrophe and trauma experienced by too many, but even acknowledgement by a minority of the bystanders can open up space for healing and liberation.

At the heart of any process of dealing with past catastrophes and trauma, there are the moral and spiritual dynamics of repentance and reparation.

### **The Power of Repentance**

There has always been a relationship between forgiveness and repentance, but also a tension, not least around which comes first. During the most recent phase of violent conflict in Northern Ireland, it was widely held that repentance came before forgiveness. Unless people of violence repented, forgiveness was not possible, and even then in a punitive society, it often appeared that forgiveness was never possible. Punitive theology even suggested that repentance might not be possible. After all a leopard could never change its spots! Some even needed what they called "*unreconstructed terrorists*" to remain as precisely that, "*unreconstructed terrorists*". The repentance that some looked for or

demanded was humiliation rather than any Judeo-Christian understanding of repentance. The years of the “troubles” were characterised by much bad theology which was an inherited tradition, skewed by centuries of sectarianism, and which often passed as orthodoxy or the true gospel. Much of this bad theology centred on a punitive God and on repentance and forgiveness. Even at a milder level repentance and forgiveness were imprisoned within sacramental or pietistic or conversionary theology. Confined to the vertical, a theology of repentance and forgiveness rarely touched the horizontal or social relationships of life.

Repentance in the Hebrew Bible only makes sense within the covenant relationship between God and community. It is prevalent in the tradition of Deuteronomy, not just the book by that name, but also the history written from the Deuteronomic perspective, Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel and I & II Kings. The prophet Jeremiah was also a Deuteronomic theologian. The key Hebrew word is *shub*, which means “to turn”. At the heart of the covenant relationship was the TORAH, the way of life in community together. The community violated their way of justice, compassion, social solidarity and right relations and peace. Repentance was to reverse direction, turn around and resume the journey on the way of TORAH or as covenant community. Repentance was an intentional act to live and act differently in the way of covenant values.

Jeremiah, who stands in this tradition, is a prophet at the beginning of the catastrophic and traumatic experience of Babylonian exile. Chapters 3-4 of his book offer an extended poem in which frequent use is made of the word “return”. It expresses Jeremiah’s theological praxis of repentance. Later in exile Ezekiel was to call for the same dynamic (Ezekiel 18 v 32). The prophet of the return from exile, Second Isaiah (ch 40-55) calls for a moral and spiritual return as well as a physical, geographical one. (Isaiah 55 v 6-7). Repentance is an acknowledgement of a past which travelled in the wrong direction, an intentional return to covenantal community and to journey in a different direction, a way of life rooted in just social relationships.

Jesus was in the Jewish tradition, rooted in covenant and TORAH, a life-giving, liberating ethical way of life and of organizing social relationships. Steeped in this tradition he pointed to a God always ready and with the capacity to forgive. In this tradition forgiveness and repentance were inseparably connected. According to Mark, Jesus initiated his public work with a Deuteronomic and prophetic call to “*Repent and believe in the good news*” (Mark 1 v 15). The Greek word is *METANOIA*, which again means an “about turn” to return, to reverse direction and travel and live differently. In this initial public statement the call to repentance is preceded by the announcement of good news, the nearness of the Kingdom or empire of God in complete contrast to the military and economic oppression of the Roman Empire. Like the Hebrew scriptures, Mark’s gospel places repentance in the context

of God's active presence, grace and love. Repentance, therefore, is response to forgiveness, not a condition. Forgiveness comes first and repentance is a response to a gift of grace. Moved by the gift of being released from the past there is an intentional response to live life in a different direction, to re-order community and life in a more liberating, ethical and wholesome way. Instead of silent indifference or violent destructive action, the about turn or return lives non-violently and for social justice for all. Repentance is a radical return to ethical non-violence and justice. Whilst it is a response to divine initiative, graciousness and forgiveness, it is also an act of moral courage.

### **The Effect of Reparation**

If forgiveness leads to repentance, repentance then leads to reparation. Luke's Gospel has a story about a tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19 v 1-10). He is Jewish, but is working for the Roman imperial system collecting hated taxes. That in itself is enough to brand him as a hate figure in the Jewish community. He has betrayed his people and identity being in imperial employ. To make matters worse, he is exploiting his role as tax collector. The Roman system did not mind how much tax was collected so long as its requirements were met. Zacchaeus was an extortionist squeezing his own people for much more than the imperial power required. In a debt-laden, poverty stricken Galilean Jewish community, Zacchaeus was truly hated and despised.

In Luke's story Jesus takes the initiative and in a crowd scene invites the tax collector to take him home for supper. A meal in the Jewish tradition was a sign of acceptance and forgiveness or release from a past, and a putting of relationships right. Furthermore, Jesus called him a "*son of Abraham*", the most dignified and valued way of describing a Jew, which must have had a huge effect on a tax collector with no value in the eyes of his Jewish community and probably no self-esteem or dignity in himself. His response to acceptance, forgiveness and restored dignity and humanity embodied both repentance and reparation. He re-orientated himself to a new value system, a new social ethic. Half of his possessions he gave to the poor, who were numerous, and to those defrauded, he paid back four times more (Luke 19 v 8). Zacchaeus made generous reparation and in doing so showed his awareness of what forgiveness really meant and how genuine his repentance really was.

Reparation is the evidence of repentance and also a response to the gift of forgiveness. It can, though, be a complex dynamic. Where lives or a life has been taken, life cannot be returned and nothing can replace the life taken. Ex-prisoners though, in Northern Ireland, have become intentionally committed to rebuilding community through community development and community relations activities. Others are active in conflict resolution and mediation work, which includes ensuring that young people in communities of deprivation do not become involved in violent activities. All of this is evidence of lives being lived in a

different direction through commitment to non-violence and justice. Reparation can sometimes only be made through gestures and as such can and do validate the integrity of a moral and ethical turn-around, i.e. repentance.

Collective repentance and reparation can be a collective way of doing penance. It is an effort to try and undo what has been done and may require active and practical attention to redistribution of land, wealth and resources. Reparation may mean redressing inequalities in employment, housing, education and health care. At this point reparation becomes restorative justice.

As for bystanders, repentance also is a response to the liberating reign of God in the midst, or to the coherence of a moral world. It is to turn from apathy and indifference as well as ambivalence to active commitment to non-violence, justice and ethical community building. Reparation may be in our intentional commitment to peace and community building to ensure that never again will violence become a destructive resort to resolving differences. It may even be that the trauma and wounds of our society can never be completely healed, but imperfect justice and peace are better than none, and we can, at least, validate the integrity of our human dignity.

### **Reflection questions**

- What does come first, forgiveness or repentance?
- What does repentance mean in practical terms in a historically violent society?
- What different ways of reparation are required to restore human dignity and justice to our traumatized society?

## **7. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY HEALING**

If reparation is seeking to undo what should never have been done in the first instance, then reparation is active restorative justice. One of the problems in the Northern Ireland context has been the contested nature of justice. In very general terms the unionist community has believed justice to be a law and order issue, a matter of security. Nationalists tend to see justice as social justice, a matter of equality and parity. These competing visions of justice are rooted in different historical experiences and are part of the legacy of partition. Unionists have always felt that they needed law and order and security, and nationalists have always needed social justice and equality. The history of Northern Ireland has always been a history of a clash of needs. But the juxtaposing of these ideas of justice leads to a

skewing of justice. This can be seen in frequent unionist anxiety about levels of policing or reduction of police personnel, and in Sinn Fein's preoccupation with equality at the expense of community relations. It is not a matter of either/or form of justice, but both together. A healthy society holds together law and order, security issues and social justice and equality. And the premise for both forms of justice working together is good community relations, or a reconciling community. Justice in its various dimensions is relational, communitarian as well as inter-personal.

Restorative justice is sometimes placed in opposition to retributive justice. There is a place for the latter in a criminal justice system and retribution does feature in the Judeo-Christian theo-ethical approach. In biblical legislation punishment is prescribed, but it is more than an end in itself. Punishment by itself does not satisfy the demands of justice. Punishment is a means to an end because justice is satisfied by repentance and restoration. In the Hebrew Bible the penalty imposed was often restitution to the victim along with compensation. In Exodus and Leviticus the retributive justice approach is one of equivalence of value. At base level a remorseful thief restored what was stolen plus one fifth. (Leviticus 6v5) Between the Levitical text and Exodus 22 v 3, there are increasing scales of equivalence, depending on the nature and extent of the crime. The Bible, therefore, has a place for retributive justice or punishment, but it is by no means the main justice focus. In Northern Ireland there is the tendency towards retribution and the punitive. This is often the dominant form of justice being advocated on radio phone-ins. Punitive ideas of God and punitive justice often go hand in hand. For many it is still the approach to dealing with the past. Again retributive justice and restorative justice should not be set in opposition. In the Judeo-Christian tradition they belong together, both are needed with the former a means to the latter. The larger focus of the Bible, therefore, is on restorative justice.

### **Restorative Justice in a Traumatized Society**

In a traumatized society, like Northern Ireland, retributive justice may be the immediate option for many, especially those who are the non-combatant victims or survivors. But punishment will not heal or renew criminal hurts. Restorative justice has a crucial role to play in a community moving beyond trauma and the past to a future in which the past cannot be forgotten, but where it is remembered in ways that no longer dominate, but liberate into new beginnings.

This is possible because restoration can happen and needs to happen at various levels. The victim is restored to human dignity and the offender is restored to right standing in the community. The community in the process is restored to peace and freedom from fear and dysfunction.

All three Synoptic Gospels tell of the baptism of Jesus and the purpose in each is to describe the mission of Jesus (Mark 1 v 9-11; Matt 3 v 13-17; Luke 3 v 22) Each of the texts draws from Isaiah 42 where justice is central and there is the inseparable connection between justice, peace and non-violence, and all three ethical values are tied to inclusivity. For the Synoptic Gospels this was the mission of Jesus and Isaiah 42v1-7 in not only magnificent poetry, but a radical socio-economic and political vision. There are two parallel Hebrew words with almost identical meanings. The first is *MISHPAT*, often translated as justice. Its main focus is on economic practices and means fairness to the poor, powerless and vulnerable.

The other word is *TSEDAQAH*, often translated as righteousness. At heart this is a relational word, right relations based on justice. It means liberation or freedom from forms of slavery and oppression leading to restored community relations. Together both words mean “*fairness justice*” and “*liberating justice*” or social and restorative justice. *TSEDAQAH* never means punishment, retribution or revenge in the Bible. “*The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever*” (Isaiah 32 v 17). The Judeo-Christian insight is that peace, quietness and trust in community relations will be realized, not through a punitive, retributive approach, but through liberating, restorative justice. For the Hebrew community and the Jesus movement this kind of justice, fairness, liberating and restorative, was central to the Kingdom or reign of God in the world. It was and therefore is central to Kingdom praxis or ethical community. The healing of a traumatized society requires the practice of restorative justice. The restoration and healing of community relations happens when justice is central. A practice of fairness in relation to the poor, powerless and vulnerable of society is not only an equality agenda, it is about restored relations. Also a practice of justice which liberates people from slavery to the past and from the oppression of violence and all forms of injustice creates community relations where peace, quietness and trust are experienced.

### **Restorative Dynamics in a Traumatized Community**

A number of countries savaged by violent conflict have used restorative justice as part of their processes towards healing and reconciling. South Africa and Rwanda come to mind. In South Africa the stories or testimony of victims of violence were key and these were spoken often in the presence of those responsible for the hurt and trauma. Part of the effect of this was to provide validation to the stories of those who were victims, and it was also to re-establish those responsible as participants in the community. In fact restorative justice is an inclusive process involving victim, offender and community.

The primary focus in restorative justice dynamics is on the victim. Within the legal justice system the victim is often overlooked. Though the system is concerned with the offence

against the law or state, the humanity of the offender is not taken into consideration either. The legal system or state punishes, which may be just as far as it goes, but the process falls far short of liberating and restoring relationships. This is why the punitive approach in itself cannot in any deep sense, realise justice. It leaves the victim, still a victim, alone with their trauma, and the offender is left with legal guilt but no onus to take responsibility.

Restorative justice works with the parties most directly affected by acts of violence and injury, and only when they themselves choose to be involved. And it also works with those involved in the violent offence ensuring that such persons have the opportunity to participate in the process to the level they choose. Those responsible for violent injury will only participate on acknowledgement of responsibility for actions. Acknowledgment really means taking responsibility and, therefore, receiving moral dignity. Violence dehumanizes, not only the one traumatized or injured, but also the one who inflicts violence. To be able to kill or bomb requires the other to be less than human. We do not kill human beings but a badge or institution or a hated impersonal other. The act of violence denies the humanity and moral being of the traumatized and in the process denies the offender's own humanity and moral worth. Those who commit acts of violence are often brutalized and not only live with guilt, if enough moral sensitivity remains, but also with the tendency to be violent people at various levels of relationships. Killing destroys soul. Legal justice does nothing to restore one's moral dignity and humanity.

The possible encounter in restorative justice, not only validates the victims experience and story, it restores the moral balance between the traumatized and the responsible. The moral equilibrium was destroyed by the act of violence and placed the victim in the control of the offender. The victim experience was one of being dominated by the other and not having moral equality. Restorative justice dynamics restore moral equality between victim and offender, which is highly important and liberating for the victim.

The inclusive process of restorative justice also recognises that community is harmed, even destroyed by every act of violence. People are left insecure and fearful. There is no "*quietness and trust*" to quote the Hebrew prophet. The stability and security of the community is destroyed. Anxiety levels are raised and when prolonged so too are the levels of depression. Relationships are destroyed by acts of violence. Neighbours may not trust each other any longer. Suspicion increases. Even if nationalists and unionists were not living in close proximity, the acts of violence increased the hatred, stereotyping of the other and refusal to trust. It even created counter-violence or ambivalence around counter-violence. For some it meant being consumed by hatred which destroyed the ability to see any good in the other. Between 1971 and 1991 the community in Northern Ireland polarized at an unprecedented level because of the effects and consequences of violence.

Demographics changed radically and have not yet reversed. Segregated relationships at various levels are a reality in a violent sectarian community.

Restorative justice is a form of community justice. The violence left no one in a small community untouched. Neighbourhoods became dysfunctional as did systems. Justice as restorative and liberating is the responsibility of everyone. The blame game like punitive justice does not and will not achieve a liberating, healing and reconciling community. The restorative justice process needs to involve all the civic stakeholders, which is why those who may have been by-standers, need to participate with victims and offenders in recovering moral dignity and humanity in community and as community. The goal of restorative justice dynamics is relational healing and the restoration of community.

There are huge challenges in this, especially when those who died through shooting and bombing can no longer speak for themselves. But there are relatives who need recognition and support. And there are those who have acknowledged their wrong-doing who need to be restored to community belonging and full participation. Whole communities also need restoration. Faith communities as communities tasked with reconciliation and participants in the Kingdom or reign of God in which justice is central, have an obligation to engage with the dynamics and practice of restorative justice.

### **Reflection questions**

- Why can punitive justice by itself never build a restored, reconciled community?
- Why is it important for the traumatized (only if they wish), those responsible for it and community representatives to engage together?
- In what practical ways can the church be a community of restorative justice?

## **8. AFTER THE DUST SETTLES; BUILDING A JUST PEACE**

Any process of healing of trauma in Northern Ireland will be complex and lengthy. The traumatized will need the solidarity of community, as well as the support of close friends and relatives. Community will include those responsible for traumatic events, acknowledging responsibility and willing to be re-integrated with a non-violent and just community. The dynamics and practice of restorative justice have a role to play. Healing though, will not mean forgetting, but may well mean not allowing the events of the past to dominate and control life. There are those who are in the process of forgiving, and have experienced release and liberation. Others cannot forgive, but have not allowed the past to dominate their lives and have found a way to move on. For others the trauma may never go away, but continue to dominate their lives, attitudes, behaviours and relationships.

The previous chapters offer pointers to the possibility of hope and healing. The seeds of new beginning are present in catastrophe. Lament, argument with God, forgiveness, acknowledgment and responsibility taking and restorative justice practices are all part of a process. If a process of healing is to take place, it will need the building of a just peace. When the dust settles on a conflict and the shooting stops, a process of community building needs to take place and justice is always needed at the heart of such a process. The injured, suffering, fearful and traumatized, those who grieve the loss of loved ones through the violence, need and deserve a just peace.

The Second Vatican Council expressed an essential biblical insight. Drawing on Sirach 32v7, it declared that '*Peace is not merely the absence of war*', rather it is '*an enterprise of justice*'. Furthermore, it is '*never attained once and for all, but must be built up ceaselessly*'. No peace without justice is the core of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and it is at the heart of Islam also. No peace without justice is the essence of Abrahamic ethic. The constant task, even calling of the Abrahamic faiths, is to build peace based on justice and to see that social justice is at the heart of community building. This means that in a war or violent situation, people of faith are not only to work for an end of the violence, but in the warring, violent activity, to keep actively focused on a just peace, and when the dust settles, to keep building a just peace.

## **Just Peacemaking**

In the last twenty plus years a group of twenty-three scholars have developed the vision of just peacemaking. The group consists of just war theorists and pacifists, each concerned with the flaws in their positions and that neither just war nor pacifism are any longer adequate. Pacifism has too often been tempted to passivity and withdrawal and just war theory has become weak in relation to just war conditions, right intention and last resort. The leader of the project is Glen Stassen, a Christian ethicist and the group have developed ten proactive practices, already proven as ways of preventing war (Glen Stassen, ed, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2 1992; *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*, Pilgrim Press, 2004 and *Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War*, Pilgrim Press, 2008).

Just peacemaking believes that by establishing practices of justice, the root causes of conflict can be addressed, which in many cases can prevent war. It might be described as pre-emptive peace. The practices of justice do not only apply to the stage prior to a war or violent conflict, but also to the post-conflict situation when community reconstruction is necessary. Just war theory and pacifism are often conflicting positions and just

peacemaking offers a way to move beyond these opposites and work for a compelling alternative. The process involved in the healing of trauma can be enhanced by a just peacemaking ethic. The ethic itself and its ten practices are rooted in the teaching of Jesus. Some of the practices are particularly relevant to Northern Ireland as a dust settles on over three decades of violence and trauma.

### **Truthful Confession**

Truth-telling is an essential part of a peacemaking process. Many trauma sufferers need to hear the truth about their own hurts, loss of loved ones or the disappeared. Many of those responsible need to tell their story beyond the blame game culture or punitive judgementalism. The injustices that caused the violence and maintained it have numerous causes and responsibility lies with institutions, systems, leaders, combatants and bystanders. In the latter case silence was never neutral, but by failing to speak and act critically, contributed to the injustices and violence itself. Truthful confession is about acknowledging wrongs and taking responsibility at whatever level of violent conflict that took place in our community and was the product of our community.

### **Non-Violent Direct Action**

A thread of violence runs through the last four centuries of Irish history and some would say for much longer. At least it can be identified in modern Irish history. Yet, there is also the thread of active non-violence, which has always meant that there was always an alternative. Atrocity and bloodletting was not the only way. The most significant example of active non-violent constitutional action for change was that of Daniel O'Connell and Catholic Emancipation in 1829. O'Connell has never had the profile he deserves in Irish history.

Gandhi achieved independence for India through non-violent action and in 1989 Europe welcomed the Revolution of Candles in East Germany and the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. The liberation of eastern and central Europe was achieved by overwhelming active non-violence. The future of Ireland belongs to non-violent direct action and commitment to it as a practice of just peacemaking.

### **Co-operative Conflict Revolution**

There were no innocent parties to the Northern Ireland conflict, even though all still have a tendency to blame the other. The blame game is pointless and is a block to the necessary peacebuilding. Truthful confession is good for the collective soul, and it is voluntary, if it is to be truthful and effective. Beyond that conflict resolution is also essential. Conflict does not

disappear overnight. Tension, anger, suspicion, lack of trust, hatred and sectarianism continue to dog relationships, and even leave the existing peace fragile. Some are still committed to violence as a way to achieve and defend.

A decade of commemorations, 2012-2022, could be exploited for political or ideological ends and draw another generation of young people into violence. Divided communities need to resolve conflict together, address together the remaining root causes and potential triggers to further or renewed violence. The majority do not want to return to the past violence, but do need to be intentional and active in co-operative conflict resolution.

### **Advancing Democracy and Human Rights**

Ireland as a whole has struggled for democracy, not least because one party states or hegemonic rule has predominated. Much has changed since partition in 1921, and in Northern Ireland since 1972, especially post 1998. Whatever flaws exist in the structure of governance, there is the possibility for a more representative participative form of democracy. The days of a one party state have gone forever and only power sharing or responsibility sharing can provide a model of democracy in Northern Ireland. At present things are far from mature or satisfactory. Much work needs to be done to advance democracy, which is rooted in the people, participative and shared.

Democracy also needs to be rooted in human rights, providing an equality under law for community relations. Community relations and human rights cannot be separated. One without the other is an illusion. Participative democracy and human rights are the basis of a just peace, and offer traumatized people the hope of a different, violence free future, a just and peaceful future.

### **Just and Sustainable Economic Development**

Often at the heart of violence and conflict are social injustices in which poverty is endemic. Communities which are economically under-resourced, underdeveloped, in which poverty and chronic long-term health problems have a connection, do not provide for stability or good relations. Where unemployment is sometimes third generation and where educational achievement is extremely low as a cause and result, community wellbeing is blocked. Social discrimination, a past blight, did not and does not help. Economic development, where there is just economies and equality of opportunity, educationally and in employment is essential. Economic strategies for communities which have suffered most during the violent conflict are a must and they must also be sustainable. Trauma in many cases will not be healed if people remain in poverty traps without hope for an economically sustainable future. Just peacemaking needs just and sustainable economic development.

## **International Efforts and Institutions**

The practice may have more to do with international disputes and global conflict. Yet a more localized conflict like Northern Ireland needs international connections. The violent conflict might not have been resolved without international help and third party intervention. Much good peace and reconciliation work would not have been achieved without international funding. It might be that the Northern Ireland conflict was the most heavily subsidised conflict on the planet, but without international goodwill and support we may not have experienced the level of peace we have.

Much of our thinking is parochial and inward-looking, though the world of information technology, global communications and travel, globalization and greater interdependence are changing perspectives. The new, more just Northern Ireland needs international friends, international investment and cultural connections with the wider world. International networks for just peacemakers are also essential to share and learn good principles and practices. Citizenship in Northern Ireland needs to be developed as global citizenship in awareness and experience.

The six just peacemaking practices mentioned here can help to move Northern Ireland beyond its violent past into a more just and peaceful future, where there is not only healing of relationships, but healing for the traumatized by the violence of over three decades. Never again is only possible within just peacemaking practices.

## **Reflection Questions**

- Why is justice so important to peacebuilding?
- Reflect on practical ways each of the six just peacemaking practices can be implemented in Northern Ireland.
- What role does the faith community have in just peacemaking?
- How can this role help bring hope to the traumatized?

BACK COVER – SEE NEXT PAGE

BACK COVER

Ethical and Shared Remembering:  
Commemoration in a New Context

OTHER TITLES IN THIS SERIES:

Ethical and Shared Remembering:  
Commemoration in a New Context

The Covenant and Proclamation:  
The Shared Values of Religio-Political Documents

Ethical Theological Responses to Shared Remembering

Living with the Legacy:  
Key Themes of the Decade, Past and Present

Ethical and Shared Remembering: Visioning the Future

Supported by Esmee Fairbairn and Henry Smith Charities  
(Northern Ireland Development Fund)  
Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland