AN URGENT PATIENCE

Christian spirituality and social action

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Introduction

Christians are called to be saints, not heroes: the story of our lives is to be built around someone else. We love because God first loved us (1 John 4.19). Every Communion service, whatever its name, reminds us of this central fact of Christian life. We can only feed because we have been fed; we are sent out in the power of the Spirit because have first been called together as Christ's Body. Christian action flows from gratitude rather than from obligation or from guilt. 'Deep calls unto deep' (Ps 42.7). The love poured out for us in Christ calls forth a grace-filled echo in our hearts.

Because the Christian life is lived in response to another, its spirituality begins with patience. The Psalmist tells us he 'waited patiently upon the Lord' (Ps 40.1) and the Prophet Isaiah writes

> In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength... Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. (Is 30.15,18)

Christian waiting is a very different thing from procrastination. No-one can read the Psalmist or the Prophets without hearing the immediacy of their call.

This is a call both for personal and communal repentance and for justice for the poor. They call for patience, yet they also call for urgency.

This short meditation on 'urgent patience' comes out of fourteen years' involvement in community organising in east London, in churches which are part of London Citizens and Citizens UK. I am grateful to all who have been companions on this journey.

Angus Ritchie
Director, Contextual Theology Centre
Feast of the Conversion of St Paul, 2012

The urgency of justice

This year, many churches are reading the Gospel of Mark at their Sunday worship. One of the Evangelist's favourite words is 'immediately'. His opening chapters are incredibly fast-paced. Jesus' ministry is shown to have a focus on those the world ignores or condemns (1.21-8, 40-5; 2.1-12, 15-17). He reminds the religious leaders of the purpose of the Law: not to be another burden on the vulnerable, but a means of protecting them from injustice (2.23-3.6).

These chapters have an insurgent feel. Jesus compares himself to a thief, whose purpose is to 'bind the strong man' and 'burgle his property' (3.22-7). His purpose is not to turn the world upside down, or to steal someone's rightful goods. Rather, Jesus turns an upside-down world the right way up, restoring just stewardship to a creation which is being pillaged and misused.

Christians working for social justice recognise this urgency. They also know the feeling of insurgency. Achieving lasting change involves tension and conflict. The lives and stories of our neighbours, the violence and wastage of potential in our communities, cry out for immediate action.

As Martin Luther King wrote from Birmingham City Jail:

> More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.

The urgency of patience

For the Christian, patience must go hand in hand with urgency. When we are impatient, our actions flow from *our* ideas and agendas, not from the will of God and from the needs and aspirations of the communities we serve.

Jesus' ministry begins with thirty years of waiting; immersing himself in the life and experience of a carpenter in Nazareth. Mark presents the baptism of Jesus as his first public act – and it is *immediately* followed by forty days in the wilderness. If the Son of God has to spend time wrestling with false directions and temptations, his followers surely need to do the same.

Reflecting on decades of experience of urban ministry, Ken Leech writes of the way contemplation and action must be held together. Far from pulling in opposite directions, each completes the other:

> Radical action follows from radical contemplation. Solitude is necessary to preserve us from superficial activism, from exhaustion, from fanaticism. To wait in adoration, to watch with the eyes of the Dove, to seek discernment, is a vital prerequisite of Christian action. We act only if we have seen, and the desert is the place of sharpened perception.

Leech writes from within the catholic tradition of Anglicanism. Throughout its history, spiritual renewal and social action have gone hand in hand. When one has

become stagnant, so has the other. New life has come when they have been pursued together.

It was amidst the cholera epidemic of the 1840s that the Sisters of Mercy in Plymouth asked their parish priest for daily Communion, to strengthen them for their work amongst the poorest in the city. This was the first time since the Reformation that an Anglican church had a daily Eucharist. Worship and action each inspired a deeper engagement with the other.

From a very different Christian tradition, the American pastor Bill Hybels has written a book on evangelical spirituality called *Too busy not to pray*. Different parts of the Body of Christ, but the same truth of Christian discipleship: a deep and authentic engagement with the Gospel's call to social justice forces us back on God's resources, not our own.

Captain Nick Coke, Stepney Salvation Army, is involved in community organising on the Ocean Estate, alongside members of several local mosques:

The Salvation Army is known around the world for its 'good works', its wide-ranging response to human need and its commitment to reaching those on the margins of society. What every Salvationist knows, however, is that our 'good works' are only as good as the faith which propels it into action.

Our founder William Booth, who was well aware of the dangers of a false dichotomy between faith and social action, constantly exhorted all Salvation Army members to regularly engage in 'knee drill' (prayer) to unleash the power that would lead to physical and spiritual transformation. 'Soup, soap, salvation' was the rallying cry of the 19th century Salvationists. Today's Salvationists are no less committed to the cause - believing every 'good work' is not merely an action in itself but a signpost to the saving grace that can be found though Jesus Christ.

Christian anger: meek, not weak

It is hard to come face to face with injustice without becoming angry. That may be no bad thing: after all, anger is an utterly Biblical emotion. We see it most famously in Jesus' cleansing of the Temple (Mark 11.15f).

This is not a comfortable story for anyone, which is perhaps why it is so rarely depicted in stained glass or other forms of Christian art.

The word 'anger' comes from the Norse word for grief. Anger, like guilt, is a sign that something is not right. Christians ministering in the inner-cities are rightly angry: at wasted potential and at blighted lives.

'Be angry' writes St Paul, 'but do not let the sun go down on your anger' (Ephesians 4.26). Anger has a place in the Christian life, but (as with guilt) it should never be granted the driving seat.

For anger to be Christ-like requires us to cultivate 'urgent patience'. Jesus' anger is disciplined by love and by prudence. He advises his followers to be 'wise as serpents', as well as to be gentle, angry and courageous. Indeed, on many occasions Jesus walks away from conflict or provocation. Mark 12.16-17 is a striking example. Reflecting on this passage, Rowan Williams observes that Jesus resists gestures which serve our emotions rather than the Gospel.

He applies the text to our current economic crisis, and the witness of the Occupy movement:

> Faced with what looks like a simple challenge about whether you pay taxes to the Roman Emperor or not, he famously shrugs it off, saying, 'Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give God what belongs to God.' In other words: don't just imitate me: think. What's the exact point at which paying taxes to the Empire gets in the way of serving God? What's the exact point at which involvement in the 'empire' of capitalist economy compromises you fatally?
>
> It may not be easy to answer this straight away, so don't expect to become a hero of conscience overnight. And, just to rub it in, there are other places in the Bible where Jesus prods us to ask ourselves about our motives before we embark on grand gestures. Are we doing this for the sake of the real issue – or for an audience?

Peter Nembhard is the Senior Pastor of ARC (A Radical Church) in Forest Gate – a leading Pentecostal church in London Citizens. Speaking to Christians involved in community organising, he reminded us how Moses had to discipline his anger at injustice. This anger led the young Moses to murder an Egyptian who was bullying one of his fellow Israelites. As Moses matures in God's service, his anger at injustice does not evaporate. Rather, it is placed in God's service, and used powerfully to deliver his people from slavery.

The story of Moses is echoed in Pastor Peter's own journey of faith: from a youthful anger which led him into jail, to leadership of a church which is challenging injustice through its organising work, and helping young people turn from gang culture to faith in Jesus Christ. Reflecting on the Beatitudes, Peter says "Meekness isn't weakness. It is anger placed at the service of love."

Patience and the Institutional Church

For nearly everyone, 'spirituality' is a more attractive term than 'Institutional religion'. It is common to contrast the (dynamic) 'spiritual message of Jesus' with the (stagnant) 'institutional church'.

Should we be surprised that one of Jesus' first acts is to appoint disciples – to set up a structure of leadership by which his Gospel will continue to be taught and embodied? Only if we forget one simple fact: that the alternative to institutions is atomisation.

Institutions happen whenever and wherever human beings enter into committed relationships, and agree to be bound by promises, rules or covenants. They come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, formal and informal – churches and Scout packs, tenants' associations and trade unions, colleges and families. They force us to balance reliability with spontaneity, faithfulness with freedom.

St Mary's, Cable Street is a prime example of the 'institutional church.' Each week, around thirty souls gather to celebrate the Mass. This comes with all the usual paraphernalia: rotas and raffles, jumble sales and Parochial Church Council meetings. On the surface, this congregation's life is hardly dramatic – but through the doors of this one church, and through the lives of its people, hundreds, perhaps thousands will come to be baptised, married and buried.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands wrestling with addiction will be helped by the drugs project the church now hosts. And tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands will be lifted from poverty wages, because of the work of London Citizens, the community organising alliance of which St Mary's is an active member.

London Citizens is a broad-based movement of religious and civic institutions in the city's most deprived areas. As well as churches, its members include mosques, gurdwaras, trade and student unions and schools.

In just a few years, London Citizens has had an extraordinary impact. Since 2005, its Living Wage Campaign has added £70 million to the incomes of London's poorest households. And it has now persuaded the Olympic Delivery Agency to make London 2012 the first 'Living Wage Olympics'.

It is no coincidence that religious congregations are the largest, best-mobilised part of the movement. They are the places where thousands gather week by week, to listen to one another's stories and to locate them in a wider narrative of meaning and of value. This listening and reflection leads on to a practical response – prayer, support, charity, and action for social change.

The story of St Mary's, Cable Street shows the vital part they have to play in building social justice. It is in religious institutions that we see the intentional nurturing of relationships, local leadership and vision. Their rules,

procedures and commitments may seem old-fashioned, but some such framework turns is essential if our 'spiritual' aspirations are to be made flesh.

We see the same struggles in the early church in Corinth. St Paul is not a legalist: he urges the Corinthians to live Spirit-filled lives, and warns that without love, their faith and virtue is as nothing. And yet, he makes equally clear that love involves discipline, humility and commitment. They – we – are called into the Church, called to be one Body in Jesus Christ. That involves one of the most fundamental and difficult of spiritual challenges: living alongside a bunch of people who you haven't been allowed to choose.

Institutions are imperfect because humans are imperfect. We need to become patient with one another, and it takes patience to live within the church. But that is our calling,

It is one thing to note that the institutional church is full of sinners, and to bemoan its structural and individual failings. That's all depressingly, undeniably true. It's quite another thing to imagine we are less vulnerable to sin, less open to delusion, when we seek a spiritual path in isolation from our neighbour. It is together that we grow in to Christ – and together that we build a more just society.

The practices of urgent patience

Spirituality is a practice, not a theory – for Christian spirituality has at its heart a relationship with Jesus, God's Word made flesh. The only value of an essay such as this comes if it helps the reader deepen that relationship.

Sr Josephine Canny OA is Chaplain to the Jellicoe Community (a resident community of interns in East London engaged in organising) and was previously Chaplain to Trinity High School, responsible for young people's engagement in London Citizens. Here, she reflects 'urgent patience' in a very different context of prophetic ministry:

One of our Sisters, imprisoned during the Communist regime, shared a cell with three other women. Angry that one of her seriously ill cellmates was being denied medical help, Sr. Alexandrine refused to eat until medical assistance was given. Punished for her "stubbornness" with a beating which proved ineffective, she was subsequently placed in solitary confinement which consisted in being lowered via a trapdoor to lie flat with barely sufficient space for her body. In an attempt to ascertain how much space she had for movement, she discovered etching on a small wooden panel above her head. Slowly she discerned the words: "In the beginning was the Word ….." She lost any sense of time during what she described as "her blissful experience"

My own memory unfortunately does not allow me to bring back whether or not her cellmate was rescued but I do remember it clearly touched the heart of one of her Prison Wardens.

The advice of the Psalmist comes to mind "Be angry and sin not" – hearts are only changed by grace.

In closing then, I want to offer five central practices for the Christian working for social justice; practices that can take different forms, but which help us cultivate the urgent patience and the disciplined anger which I have been describing.

Dedicating: The Christian needs to acknowledge each day as a gift. Calling to mind that fundamental reality helps us to cultivate an attitude which is both grateful and expectant; recognising that it is God who will give the increase. 'Urgent patience' has *watchfulness* at its heart.

From the earliest times, Christians have used the Song of Zechariah (Luke 1.68-79) to express this gratitude and dedication:

> In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us;
> To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Discerning: Jesus challenges the religious leaders of his day to discern the signs of the times. As he observes, they can read the coming weather from the colour of the sky, but they have not learnt to read the spiritual climate.

We are blessed with many tools for such discernment; most obviously the gift of the Scriptures, which speak of God's action through his people in countless centuries and contexts. Through it we learn of God's character, and hear his summons to new life.

Karl Barth said Christians must have the Bible in one hand and newspaper in the other. There are of course other sources than journalism for reading the signs of our own times! As well as beginning the day in prayer, we need to end it with a time to meditate on its events: the signs we may otherwise miss of the presence and the promptings of God – as well as what the day reveals about the thoughts and habits of our own hearts.

At the heart of community organising is the 'one-to-one'; a face to face meeting with another, to share the stories of our lives, our passions and our hopes. These encounters too are part of how we learn of the character and purposes of God; and the work of his Spirit in our daily lives.

Receiving: The Christian life begins with receiving, not with giving. Like Peter, we all find that difficult. Those of us who are social justice activists are usually among the worst. We want to wash the feet of others, and find it hard to acknowledge our own feet are also dirty.

Mutuality – the ability to receive as well as to give – is at the heart of the divine life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It needs to be at the heart of our common life. 'The poor' are not the passive recipients of 'our' moral excellence. We receive together, from God and from each other. That is the challenging message of the Good Samaritan. It is told to place the (Jewish) hearer in the role of *recipient* of generosity from a surprising place – and it needs to unsettle our moral smugness in the same way.

Christians engaged in social action need to cultivate this capacity to receive: in prayer and worship, and in their daily encounters. Our times of prayer at the start and end of the day helps us to do this, as do our common acts of worship – among them the Sacrament of Holy Communion, in which Jesus feeds each of us with his very life.

Giving: Our giving flows from our receiving; this is what makes it a truly *joyful* sacrifice. Our self-giving is not only inspired by Christ's self-offering; by it we are grafted ever more fully into his very being: 'Christ in us, the hope of glory'. It is here that we see the total unity of Christian spirituality and social action: for the very act of 'journeying out' in mission and in love draws us to the heart of God.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus offers us a more detailed picture of the shape of this self-giving life. In Matthew 5, they end with a twist. A series of blessings which might refer to other people ('Blessed are *those* who...') suddenly turn into a very personal challenge ('Blessed are *you* when

people persecute *you* and despise *you* and speak all kinds of calumny against *you...*')

Delighting: Earnestness is a besetting sin of Christians, and one to which campaigners are peculiarly vulnerable.

Scottish Calvinism is often thought the most austere of Christian traditions. Yet its Shorter Catechism offers us this account of our purpose as human beings:

> Q: What is man's chief end?
> A: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever

Delight is at the heart of Christian spirituality: the enjoyment of God and of his creation. This is a joy which in different ways infuses the worship and the common life of the churches we have been describing. They are places of vibrancy as well as desert, of celebration as well as struggle.

As we consider the rhythms of our individual Christian life – our habits of prayer, of worship and discipleship – we need make room to cultivate delight. There must be time of 'Sabbath' inside the church and far beyond its walls.

Pope John Paul II describes the central role of the Christian Sabbath:

> "The Lord's Day" is the day ... when men and women raise their song to God and become the voice of all creation. That it is why it is also the day of rest... The interruption of the often oppressive rhythm of work

> expresses the dependence of man and the cosmos upon God... Without a constant awareness of that truth, man cannot serve in the world as co-worker of the Creator.

These moments of Sabbath remind us of our eternal destiny and dignity. For East London's Christians, the promise of the heavenly Jerusalem is not an opiate, distracting them from their struggle in the earthly city. It gives them the assurance that their dignity is not defined by present circumstances, and should provide each of us with the spiritual resources for a struggle which requires generosity and patience as well as urgency and anger:

> Now, in the meantime, with hearts raised on high,
> we for that country must yearn and must sigh,
> seeking Jerusalem, dear native land,
> through our long exile on Babylon's strand.

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