

Disinheritance of the Poor

In dealing with the church and the poor I am reminded of a letter I received from Roy (Baron) Hattersley. He wrote expressing appreciation of something I had written. He added that he remained an atheist, but a perplexed one, when he took into account the self-giving, in compassion and service, of Christians and the difference that that made to the world. The fact that their commitment sprang from their faith disturbed his atheistic certainty.

In previously noted forms of disinheritance my concern was that the church live up to its calling to be 'self-convened before the Living-Word-in-Christ without human masters' in such self-giving that the world might believe that Christ is sent by God. In the case of the poor there exists, all over the world, examples of sacrificial Christian self-giving in concern for the lowest and the least which may be respected by people of no such faith. An example is found in the Communist government of China. While Mao is retained as a figurehead, his hostility to the church is being jettisoned. The Chinese government sees the power of good that Christians do in society and allows the church some space.

But it remains true that poverty has many faces and the church needs to be aware of different ways in which these surface in human life.

I and others are indebted to the perceptive theologian Elsa Tamez for the examination of Old Testament words covering different types of poverty and oppression which may allow us to take account of forms of poverty today which are less obvious. Different ways exist in which human beings may be denied their innate dignity as creatures made in the image and likeness of God. Her book 'Bible of the Oppressed' was published by Orbis Books in 1982.

God's love for the poor

God requires all humanity to live justly by one another. Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, the whole fabric and texture of life working the way God wants it to be. The Holy Spirit provides gifts which allow a community of faith to share with Christ in the transformation of life as it is, to a life marked by justice, truth and peace. Jesus said: 'I am come that people might have life, full and abundant life'. Poverty exists as a denial to oppressed people of their right to fulfilled life. Faces marked by the likeness of God are rubbed in the dirt. Life destined for fulfilment is made oppressive.

The demand that life be established on just relationships throbs through the bible like a drumbeat. Psalm 72.14 is one of the many points at which this is made plain: 'He delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and needy and saves their lives. From oppression and violence he redeems their life.'

Elsa Tamez affirms:

'oppression and liberation are the very substance of the entire historical context within which divine revelation unfolds.'

A God who Liberates

When liberation theology made its appearance there were church authorities who tried to dismiss it as merely Marxist-influenced whereas it was based authentically on the scriptures. Jesus presented himself as the Good Shepherd whose flock could *go in and out and find pasture*. Where people are oppressed it is characteristic that they are not free to 'go in and out' and have great difficulty to 'find pasture'. In the Old Testament a central place is given to the exodus from slavery in Egypt; in the New,

the exodus which Christ accomplished at Jerusalem from every form of slavery (translators treat Luke 9.31 as referring to his exodus from earthly life, but the Greek word has wider connotations which resonate with its Old Testament use). God hears the cries of the oppressed even when they are too robbed of life to turn these into prayers (Exodus 2.23, 24; 3.7) God acts to deliver, even though people are as reluctant to be his agents as was Moses.

God is not neutral. Mary saw this clearly:
'He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich empty away.'

The realisation that God seeks liberation from oppression for the whole human race finds new expression in our time. One of the gifts of the Vatican II Council was to put the scriptures into the hands of the people, instead of keeping them in 'safe' oversight of priestly minds. Biblical references are clear and direct in the Misa Tipica, the indigenous Mass which draws upon the experience of basic people in Central America. Their own images contrast the will of God with the reality they have to live – as Western, abstract language can not. I stayed in the Ciudad Sandino in Nicaragua and took part in the celebrations which marked the first anniversary of the success of the revolution. There the indigenous form was used.

In the Creed of the Mass of Nicaraguan Farmers, we find:

'I believe in you,
my companion,
the human Christ, the worker Christ,
the conqueror of death.
By your measureless sacrifice
you have begotten the *new human being*
who is destined for *liberation*.

You are living
in every arm raised
to defend the people
against exploitative domination;
because you are alive on the ranch,
in the factory, in the school
I believe in your truceless struggle,
I believe in your *resurrection*'

The Kyrie, the 'Lord have mercy' cry is

'Christ, Christ Jesus,
be one with us.
Lord, Lord my God,
be one with us,
Christ, Christ Jesus,
take sides
not with the *oppressor class*
that squeezes dry and devours
the community,
but with the *oppressed*,
with my people
thirsting for peace.'

I met Elsa Tamez in the study centre of the World Council of Churches, Bossey, in Celigny, Switzerland and was immediately impressed by the acuteness of her theological thinking. In the reflections which follow I am entirely indebted to her for the research into the flavour of Hebrew words for forms of oppression identified in the Old Testament. I simply build on the insights which her work has given me. I encountered oppression in Elsa's backyard by journeys in Central and South America. In 1973 I came back from Chile, and placed an article in the 'Scotsman' about the undermining of Allende's democratically elected government, anticipating the Pinochet coup. I saw with my own eyes broad roads in Honduras, not for local farmers but for military equipment, made with U.S.A. money, and leading to the Nicaraguan border, to support the illegal Contra forces in their destructive work. In Guatemala I got word from basic Christian communities 'Wait for us to make contact. If you come openly to one of our gatherings you could be recognised as a foreigner, and the military could follow you in and shoot us up.' In El Salvador my rucksack was, by accident, locked away in Oscar Romero's headquarters and it looked as if I would have to sleep rough in the open where death squads roamed. John Pilger once induced a C.I.A head he interviewed and cornered, to admit that no law or concern for human life would be allowed to stand in the way of the promoting of U.S. interests; I have heard with my own ears U.S. support for dictatorships. 'We don't mind bastard being in charge of countries as long as they are our kind of bastards' (these included the genocidal killer Rios Montt).

We need to hear Jesus 'not for you' to his disciples about the exercise of power by the 'rulers of the nations'.

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The words which Elsa examines have, to some extent, meanings which run into one another as well as having slightly different and illuminating uses for particular types of oppression. She divides them into those with international and within-nation reference.

Elsa selects nine generative words used with different nuances for 'oppression' in the Old Testament. She notes that the word 'gagal' often accompanies the nine chosen. It is the word for robbery. Different forms of oppression rob people of the 'life abundant' which Jesus Christ came to bring. Yes, some people may become poor through their own fault or through mischance. But the root of poverty is violence. God has provided resources to sustain all created life. Some grab for more than their share. Others are despoiled in consequence. In the Old Testament record as in the New, violence is exercised to pilfer the very quality of life which God intends for the whole creation.

'Riches' are sometimes considered to be the antithesis of poverty. Jesus, after saying that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God yet adds 'for God all things are possible'. He makes it clear that it is the *piling up of riches* which is both stupid and sinful. The man who proposes to make more barns to store up wealth through harvests is warned of the foolishness of greed – he may die at any time and have to give account to God of his life. Mammon is an idol which usurps God's place in life, and no coverup of religious practices can conceal that sinful rejection of God's intention that 'justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream'. What stands over against poverty, engendering it, is not so much riches as violence. They can

combine. Riches and violence are twins, though the rich may cover up that reality better than others.

Corporate greed manifest in boardrooms in our time is shown to be both stupid and sinful. Directors awarding one another salaries and golden handshakes which mean that they store up more wealth than can meet their thirst for happiness and fulfilment and status are robbing those who contribute significantly in the whole operation in which they are engaged. Society which provides an environment and resources which enable their projects to succeed is not given its due. The world community which is meant to share the resources which they grab for themselves is deprived.

Poverty is the result of robbery with violence in biblical thinking.

'Nagash'

The word is used for forceful oppression, especially forced labour. In the book of Exodus it is used for the treatment of the Hebrew people by taskmasters. The Egyptians 'made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work they made them serve with rigour'. The excessive demands were capped by making them find their own straw for making bricks.

People can be denied all choice for their lives in contrast to Jesus' will that they 'go in and out and find pasture'. They can be denied time for leisure, for family, for themselves: robbed of that all round quality of life which conveys the meaning of 'perfection' in its biblical use. They can be forced to accept conditions for living and working which are harsh, dehumanising.

When I was a theological student, I worked voluntarily in the Pleasance Settlement in Edinburgh. In neighbourhood visitation I came across an oldish couple who seemed only to exist rather than live. They had glazed eyes, no conversation. Poverty had robbed them of their humanity.

Cockle pickers knew the poverty laid on them by taskmasters who were reckless with their lives and conditions in which they lived and worked. Immigrants face such dangers of overwork and harsh situations. The whole flow of people from one country to another can expose them to exploitation, a form of poverty covered by the Hebrew word 'nagash'.

Bangladesh is a major supplier of mass-produced clothes. Taskmasters of our day can impose conditions of overwork, low wages, danger to life and limb – and buyers in this country can be attracted by the quality and cheapness of the products. So we must be alert to the price at which clothes are produced by people who are desperate to have some means of livelihood. The huge loss of life in a recent Bangladesh fire, where the safety of the workforce was neglected, brings to our door the concern that we pay a fair price for goods we purchase and that we require conditions in which goods are produced to be safe, healthy and human.

The minds of oppressors are filled with their own human interests and are prepared to reduce other human beings to a dehumanised state to get those personal interests fulfilled.

'Anah'

The word conveys the sense of domination which humiliates. To deprive people of their personal dignity is to impoverish them in their inmost being, to obliterate the image of God which is every human being's birthright.

In the Old Testament, the Suffering Servant was despised and rejected by others ... held of no account ... oppressed and afflicted. In the great graph of ascent and descent in Philippians 2, Jesus is shown as voluntarily taking on himself the position

of 'doulos', a 'nothing', to be identified with the lowest and the least – a redemptive act. Getting alongside those who are degraded is one way of restoring their human dignity, providing a sign that God does not accept the low valuation which some give to others.

On one occasion, Margaret and I looked over the city of Joppa (Jaffa) with a North African Israeli – who mourned the anti-Semitism of fellow Israelis. In his young days, Jews and Arabs had played happily together. Now Palestinians were humiliated. The word 'apartheid' is rejected as a true description of the existing situation; but on one occasion I went directly from apartheid South Africa to Israel. Seeing young Israelis with guns over their shoulders sneering at Palestinians led me to believe that the word was justified. It seems to be forgotten that the Holocaust remains a warning that one race must not enslave another physically, but must also not humiliate another, treat a race as sub-human.

In India Dalit (untouchable) women are rebelling against the only option to hunger open to them – the hands-on removal of excrement of higher castes.

One use of the word covers the humiliation of women by rape. 'Comfort women' in the Japanese army, girls taken hostage in the Lord's Resistance Army, those trapped into sexual slavery by people-traffickers remind us that this exists as a form of poverty imposed by those who have no conscience about degrading others.

The acceptance of poverty occurs wherever the way of looking at life by the oppressor is absorbed into the mentality of the oppressed so that victims consider themselves as worth nothing. We are called to resist all such subjection of human beings to other human beings.

'lahats'

The form of oppression to which the word refers is one to which people are harshly smashed down so that they cry out with a cry which may be heard or disregarded.

Elsa Tamez neatly illustrates different aspects of oppression today by looking at different words used to describe oppression in Egypt recorded in Exodus. The Egyptian rulers made harsh exploitive demands to secure the results they wanted ('nagash'); this penetrated to Hebrew peoples' being ('anah'): the oppression was such that they cried out for deliverance ('lahats'). She discerns a pattern in the Old Testament:

1) an oppressive situation 2) outcry 3) the cry is heard 4) liberation follows.

In Isaiah 19.23,24 the liberation is described not as one nation defeating an oppressing nation, but the establishment of a new community of nations. The blessing of the Lord of hosts is: 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage'. But if the liberated become oppressors in turn: 'I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel' says the Lord, the God of hosts 'and they shall oppress you (lahats)'.

In Nicaragua the dictator Somoza had taken power; exiled, or otherwise 'disposed of' opponents; and accumulated lands and businesses. I was in touch with the growing resistance in which basic Christian communities played a significant part till the liberation of 1979. I was able to take part in the celebration of the first anniversary in 1980. Ronald Reagan said that the new order was a threat to the U.S.A.. The threat was in no way military ('a base for Communist expansion' cf. the treatment of Grenada). It was in the priorities which a poor country established which put to shame the priorities of Reagan's regime. Concentration was on sharing out land and on developing schools and medical centres, hated signs which were targeted for destruction by the illegal Contra army. It was too good a revolution to be allowed to

succeed.

Action against the Iraq war was and against airport and motorway extension provide means of insisting that those in power are not to make the people voiceless. For voicelessness is a form of poverty.

Lives taken over by any form of dictatorship or at the mercy of unelected forces, such as the Murdoch empire, are denied basic human rights.

We find satisfaction in the fact that Britain stood alone at one point against the Nazis in the 1940s. We should honour the fact that Fidel Castro and the Cuban people stood alone when Russia collapsed and its economic support was withdrawn. They were supposed at that point to surrender to capitalism. They stood out, against the odds. In the end they provided encouragement to other Latin America countries to stop being client states and take their destiny into their own hands.

Words for oppression within nations lead Elsa to illustrate from Ezekiel 22.29: 'Landowners have practiced extortion (ashaq) and committed robbery (gazel); they have oppressed (yanah) the poor and needy and have extorted (ashaq) from the sojourner without redress'.

I witnessed personally an event which the word 'lahats' would cover when the World Council of Churches asked me to be a chaplain to the Munich Olympics on their behalf (they had put me in charge of Tourism questions as an extra to the job to which I was appointed).

On the day when Palestinians took Israeli athletes hostage I was in the stadium before the Olympics managers had got their act together, and could have walked in on the Palestinian and Israeli showdown through a door still unguarded – if I had lost my reason altogether!

Israeli widows tried to get the London Olympics to stay silent at some point in memory of Israelis killed by people they called 'terrorists'. The Palestinians represented a cry of pain, forced out by anguish at a world which seemed to be giving no attention to Israeli oppression of their people. All but one of the Palestinians paid with their lives for their daring. But the cry began to be heard.

In our country, where there is difficulty in getting legal aid to demand justice, violence is done to the poor – equally so where children's support leaves them under the poverty line. Domestic violence has long robbed partners of the control of their own lives, e.g. putting them in fear of the other partner's hands on the doorhandle, returning from the pub drunk, liable to beat them up. Their cry of pain is a call for justice.

'daka'

This is the word for the severest form of oppression, the denial of all that makes human life human, the grinding down of persons, inflicted relentlessly. It is the word used for harshest oppression within countries, as 'nagash' is used for that between countries, though these words can be interchangeable or used together.

Isaiah points out that, when the cruel oppression in Egypt had been removed, internal oppression can take its place. The rulers of Judah are described as 'dogs which have a voracious appetite'. Right living people are obliterated under their heel 'and no one is concerned'. The prophets in general bring to book those within the chosen people who oppress them. Jesus reproves scribes and Pharisees who use power for self-advantage and extortion. In our time Palestinians get their land stolen, are treated as 'lesser breeds', are subjected to equivalents of the pass laws which obtained in South Africa under apartheid – and they still are blamed for the failure to establish peace

while the law is bent to favour Israelis. The most drastic act of impoverishment to inflict on others is to rub out their humanity. Where the image of God is not honoured, God 'overturns the mighty in the night and they are crushed' in turn (Job 34.25). But that is difficult to discern.

'daka' has 'crushing down' connotation with an added emphasis on getting the oppressed to feel guilty as if the weight of that clamp-down were not only experienced but could justly be traceable to their own faults. To make a work-desert and call it 'peace', and label the victims as 'scroungers' is an attempt to internalize guilt. The occupation movement is a contemporary sign of the rejection of 'daka' developments.

Tok

The context in which oppression operates can be a tissue of lies.

Pharaoh castigates the Hebrew people for being lazy when they are being worked to the bone. The present government castigates as lazy those³ its own policies have robbed of work opportunities.

Tony Blair twisted intelligence information on Iraq and suggested that there was evidence of weapons of mass destruction which could be quickly brought into play. This resulted in so many deaths of our own soldiers, the bereft families who suffered and uncounted civilians in Iraq. Desmond Tutu wants him to be made answerable. I was there when he spoke in Stirling to justify war. What he said amounted to 'Trust me. I know more than you do'.

In David Cameron's 2012 Christmas message he honoured Jesus as the light of the world and dishonoured him in practice. That light shows up the need for the poor to be lifted high and the rich sent empty away. His policies left the rich high out of the morass of austerity, and sent the poor empty away. Simon Barrow of Ekklesia wrote: 'In the recent spending review, tax changes hit those at the top by around £1 billion. But this is a drop in an ocean of wealth. By contrast, nearly four times as much money, some £3.7 billion, was cut from the incomes of the poorest.'

The word 'tok' also fits promises of the present government. These were made to get their hands on the levers of power. If a prize were offered for drawing lines between David Cameron's pre-election promises and what he actually did, it is doubtful if anyone would even bother entering. He promised to protect the NHS in England but did not say that it would be protected for speculators' benefit. In early December 2012 Ipsos MORI produced the result of a survey which confirmed 'The number one area the public want to be protected from cuts' is the NHS. The Nuffield Trust which sponsored the survey warned the signs were that we were moving into a two-tier Health Service where the rich could buy care where ordinary folk would find it severely rationed – that is not a reform of the NHS but a change in its fundamental character, effected by deceit.

George Osborne tries to pull wool over eyes through coverups. We have not heard him admit that the low cost of borrowing, from which he has profited, was a legacy from the previous government; or that it is now clear that Alistair Darling's judicious balancing of debt reduction and measures for growth would already have shown positive results while the imposition of a rightwing ideology, market-led and privatisation-prone has put the economy in the doldrums; nor that he, so loud in his condemnation of the rate of borrowing is borrowing an extra estimated £212 bn – not to invest in growth but to cover the holes in his failed policies. Are we to get one-sided austerity, heavy on the poor, light on the rich, plus heavy borrowing?

Dak

In the case of 'tok'; hope can be crushed out of victims. 'Dak' suggests such an idea as tyres worn out by the erosion of roads or cloth laundered till it wears out and seems useless; yet a grain of hope remains. 'Tok' is used only fourteen times in the Old Testament, 'dak' six times. Psalmists use it to suggest the small edge of light at the end of the tunnel, that gives it its special character.

The edge of hope which can remain in conditions of severe oppression is founded in the nature of God, the God who requires that 'justice flow down like a river and right living like a mighty stream'. Whatever human beings may do to one another, however unyielding oppression might seem to be, God can effect change. Against the odds Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt though they were unarmed and found it difficult to get rid of a slave mentality (note the challenge to Moses in Exodus 16.31 looking back to Egypt 'when we sat by the flash pots and ate our fill of bread...')

The hope of the poor and oppressed is invested in God who will not act separately from human beings, but with them can accomplish the pulling down of strongholds.

We are at a time when there is light at the end of the tunnel. The overall word is 'Liberation'

In Galatians 5.1 Paul urges Christians: 'For freedom Christ has set me free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery'. In his commentary on Paul's letter 'Good news in Galatians', John Davies writes:

'Paul is the apostle of freedom. He does not offer a theory of freedom; nor is he using his religious and political privileges in an attempt to appeal to the powerful to give a little more freedom to the powerless. Like Jesus before him, Paul moves among the powerless themselves. He bids the enslaved claim a freedom, he bids the disinherited claim an inheritance, which is already theirs. Because of this strategy, Paul, like Jesus, was seen as a threat to security and became a victim of counter-revolutionary violence. It was because of this that he could claim to have been crucified.'

The same sense is found in a basic ecclesial communities' understanding membership of the Church as those who are 'self-convened before the Living-Word-in-Christ, without human masters'. 'Self-convened' by spontaneous combustion of the Holy Spirit working at the grassroots, not assembled as in a Billy Graham campaign or a papal visit; and giving heed to the mind of Jesus Christ, not drilled by hierarchies or bureaucracies into acceptable forms of conformity, but freely.

I took part in the first gathering under James Cone's leadership of black theologians from the U.S.A. meeting with Europeans in Geneva. It was a sign of freedom from historical disinheritance not only for blacks but for women. The Communion which summed up the conference was presided over by seven women from different countries. It was not known who were ordained and who were not – the word in any case simply means 'appointed' and is often given too heavy a significance. What was known was they could preside sensitively with understanding of the meaning of the sacrament. Blacks made voiceless, women made voiceless, asserted their God-given place and undertook God-given responsibilities. In each case small embers of liberation began to be blown into flame.

In Korea, Minjung theology, perceptively encouraged by Yong Bok Kim, emerged from the failure of evangelical missions to be effective with basic people. Those who found themselves thus stymied, faced the fact that they lived in a different world from

those basic people. Communication would need to take place by their life-styles not only by their words. Some shared the life of squatters, others lived with poor farmers. When they shared the pain, fatigue, despair and anger of the socially lowest of the low they gained fresh perceptions based on reality. What is more, they found that perceptions of that underclass of what life was for, produced a grounded theology like that based on the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. There had to be shift of ground, the learning of a different language of experience, the readiness to listen to voices in contexts which had been alien and learn a new language for the theological insights of the Minjung to be appreciated. Light at the end of a very dark tunnel came not just from sharing words but from sharing life.

A major contributor to liberation was the Vatican II Council.

Yanah

The word means to enslave, to the point of death-dealing. Rulers, judges, prophets and priests spill innocent blood (Ezek.22.6), 'destroying lives to get dishonest gain' 'practising extortion' (i.e. 'robbery') killing people off to get their way.

In the book of Exodus we find 'You shall not enslave (yanah) a stranger or oppress (lahats) him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt'.

The sense of going the length of rubbing out life in order to acquire for yourself desirable property in land or personal relationships is illustrated by Ahab's acquisition of Naboth's vineyard, and David's of Uriah the Hittite to get his wife Bathsheba for himself. The idea of enslaving is also strong. It covers all kinds of ways in which people can be robbed of life.

Forms of life-denying slavery in the last century persist in changed forms in our time. It seems to be little known that in the Hiroshima nuclear explosion an estimated 100,000 Koreans had been killed. Their Japanese conquerors forced them to do slave-labour in factories which provided supplies for the war effort. The lives to which no one had a right were simply taken away.

Trafficked women are deluded with false promises of interesting and rewarding work, their passports are taken away and they are forced to be sexual or domestic slaves. I had a base in London in the house of the Columbans who got women to escape through a back door or such, came with the police to demand the confiscated passports and found temporary accommodation for them (my spare room was on offer but was too far from London) with the prospect of getting them settled or returning them home if that should be what was wanted.

O the poverty of living which is inflicted on victims by rapists and paedophile priests! Bodies which are temples of the Holy Spirit are violated against the will of the persons concerned. A lifelong form of despoliation of that which is integral to one's being has to be suffered – all for the gain of people who treat the bodies of others as mere means to provide sexual relief or gratification.

'ratsars'

In this word emphasis is on the intention of oppressors to rob others of what they want to acquire. In the Old Testament such unjust practices can simply be called acts of robbery. King David coveted Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, whom he arranged to get killed to have her. To bring home to him the evil he had done, the prophet Nathan gave the example of a rich man with flocks and herds who, when a visitor arrived whom he should entertain, spared his own flocks and herds and killed a poor man's one lamb which had become part of the family. That is the impoverishment of life that the powerful can land on the poor in order to possess what they covet. That is what the word ratsats is used for. God has provided a world in

which there is sufficient for all. But some grab for themselves far beyond their needs and deprive others, even of what is needed merely to sustain life. In chapter 22 Ezekiel lists different forms of robbery. Princes 'devour the people and seize their wealth and valuables; they make widows...' Priests? 'I am dishonoured among them'. 'The city's leaders are like wolves, tearing their prey, shedding blood and destroying people's lives to obtain ill-gotten gain' 'Prophets whitewash over the cracks, their vision is false and their divination a lie' 'The common people resort to oppression and robbery, they ill-treat the unfortunate and the poor, they oppress the foreigner and deny him justice'. God will not be lenient to those who so mistreat others.

When in chapter 11 Isaiah envisages God's intention for life on earth he includes what goes beyond human life: '...with righteousness he will judge the poor and decide with equity for meek of the earth'....'and the wolf will lie down with the lamb...' 'In our time, animal habitats may be eroded and species be eliminated if forests are cleared and land is occupied without concern for the wellbeing and even the life of creatures which depend on these to sustain their life. God's will that human beings act as trustees and stewards of creation means that we are to care for all other living things and not rob them of their means of sustenance.

Jesus made a difference between obeying the law and living truthfully. Loopholes in law can be exploited by those who have the money to employ lawyers to identify artful dodges. Jesus saw the law commanding the keeping of the Sabbath to be so surrounded by nitpicking regulations that it tied people up instead of releasing them in 'joyful observance'. He burst out 'the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath'. Faced by a young ruler who had kept all the commandments of the mosaic law from his youth, Jesus urged him to do what went beyond the law to be 'perfect', sell his goods, give to the poor.

Starbucks kept within the law – and still cheated the taxpayers. Those who take advantage of tax havens and tax avoidance schemes are legally in order, but humanly they are self-advantaging cheats, robbing others who have to pick up the bill.

Paul put it this way, the law is 'a paedagogos to bring us to Christ'. The paedagogos was a slave given charge of a young boy of wealthy parents – parents who cannot be bothered supervising children and seeing that they have a disciplined life – much as rich parents today can get rid of equivalent responsibilities by sending children to boarding schools. The boy put in the slave's care needs to be willing to learn to live by the truth not simply to obey rules and regulations. The truth as is in Jesus Christ makes much greater demands and offers much greater promises. Jesus said that he came, not to destroy the law but to fulfil it. The law tries to set out in various obligations the boundaries which should not be overstepped to assure good human conduct. But formulae can never ensure good conduct and lead to truthful living.

'ashaq'

The word describes unfettered violence willed on others, utter ruthlessness of action.

When Margaret and I looked over Jaffa with a North African Israeli what he mourned was the coarsening of character in his people compared with the situation in his young days. When Yasser Arafat was playing his part, the complaint was that he was holding back all progress towards a mutually agreed peace. Once he died (or was killed, we are waiting to see) the pace was upped, not towards peace, but to the establishment of Greater Israel. The blockage had been Arafat's determination to get justice for his people. Hamas is described and treated as a mere terrorist organisation

when it has been democratically elected.

Israel has been ruthless in the elimination of those who stood in its way. It resorted to killer drones to get rid of opponents. Unfortunately Barak Obama has adopted the same approach 'taking out' opponents.

When did assassination gain legitimacy? Assassinations by drones seem to go unpunished, almost unnoticed internationally. When did it cease to matter that civilians were inevitably killed when the targeted person was killed. Drones should be treated like nuclear bombs, weapons of indiscriminate destruction.

The violence of dictators against those unprepared to submit to the corruption and injustice of their regimes, produced affliction which was on a very much lesser scale, yet is illuminative of the poverty experienced by those targeted. My priest friend in the Philippines, Ed de la Torre, told me of the kind of poverty inflicted on someone who was on the run from the police under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. You were hunted, your face known to the police. You could not go to any public eating house. Yes, there were safe houses. But how long could you trust them to be safe? Ed told me how, day after day, the raw pain of hunger tears at your guts, the fear of discovery makes every moment jittery. In the end he was betrayed in what was supposed to be a safe house, and jailed. I visited him in jail, without any previous authorisation – much as Peter walked out of his prison but without the spectacular effects which accompanied Peter's release!

Prof. Murdo Ewan Macdonald told me how, in a German Prisoner of War Camp, the shortage of rations produced an obsession with the need for food which meant that that filled the mind from morning to night. He could not think of God because the craving for food so filled his mind. That was till the stage was reached when the body decided there was no point in being mastered by the craving. It would make do with what was actually provided, however meagre. The body's decision brought relief. He could think of God again.

The ruthlessness which can surface as it has in recent history is a warning to every human being to 'put on Christ' – put on a life which is steadfastly given over to the way of life Jesus Christ advocated and exhibited. In the face of contemporary pressures he refused to bring to his aid 'twelve legions of angels'. He endured an unjust trial, torture by whipping, mocking with a crown of thorns, stumbling exhaustion, the pain and despair of crucifixion, the God-forsakenness of God. We need a humanity which does not give way, as it has in our day, to torture and rendition, humiliation of prisoners and suspects, death-dealing to innocent civilians - penetrating the veneer of any claim to be a God-fearing people. To have to establish breadlines under a government which cushions its wealthy patrons and financial backers against any real burden-bearing with austerity demands made on the poor and vulnerable, shows one application of the meaning of ashaq in our day.

Poverty truly has many faces.

Hymn

Poverty is Violation

1. All made in God's image
and robbed of that crown
the women who're trafficked
are sore trodden down:
the glad love of living
so carelessly leached
the core of their beings
so ruthlessly breached.

3. The fear of disclosure
makes migrants engage
in slavish conditions
for half the true wage:
in this cruel injustice
we too may collude
demanding cut prices
for clothes, flowers and food.

2. All made in God's image
their tender years lost
the children on rubbish heaps
know life's true cost:
they work for a pittance
and breathe the foul air
their childhood discarded
To win meagre fare.

4. But Christ came on earth
new life to bestow
the poor lifted high
the rich cast below:
He willed life abundant
and called us to share
in world transformation
by action and prayer.

