

TRUTH IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE  
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It is a tremendous pleasure and privilege to be here today to give this lecture. This group is a worthy audience in itself; but I am particularly honoured to have been asked to address you because in so doing sweet memories of Lesslie Newbigin have been rekindled, and I have welcomed the opportunity to remember, gather together again, the influence he had on my professional life.

I worked with Lesslie for two years, from 1988 – 1990, when he was a member of a group called the Foundation for the Study of Christianity and Society. This ecumenical group had been convened by Paul Rowntree-Clifford, a Methodist, who with Lesslie had been tasked by the British Council of Churches to re-imagine the place and influence of Christianity in society today. The project *The Gospel and our Culture* was, of course, closely aligned with the work of this group. It was a fantastic first job for a theology graduate who had no idea what to do with her life except that she wanted to serve in the grandest, biggest way possible.

My lasting memory of Lesslie was hearing him speak, in a group of disaffected and sceptical biblical scholars, of his utter conviction that at the moment of the crucifixion/resurrection, everything changed.

Re-reading some of his material, as it has been provided for this conference, has reminded me of the force of that conviction. In relation to my subject today, and my professional life today, I was especially struck by the following passage:

The focus of the biblical vision is on the final vindication of God in the gift of his perfect reign, symbolized in a city of perfect beauty and glory into which all the nations are to bring their honour and glory. This gift of God's blessed reign is both imminent, in the sense that it is the *proper horizon of all our actions here and now*, [my italics] whether in the public or the private realms, and at the same time a secret whose timing is wholly in the keeping of God who alone can know what possibilities there remain for repentance, faith and obedience. Our actions do not create this new order, nor do they bring it about. They are, in Albert Schweitzer's fine words, acted prayers to God that he may give us the Kingdom. We act now (in the public realm as in our personal and domestic life) in ways which correspond to the reality which is to be the final reality, the judgement which will be the final judgement. These actions do not directly solve the world's problems. They may fail. They will probably be forgotten after a few years or generations. They are simply committed to God, entrusted to his wise hands, in the faith that nothing entrusted to him is lost. There is an analogy, indeed a continuity here with our most intimate personal acts of discipleship. We know that our mortal bodies will, before many years, be nothing but

dust and ashes. Yet we cherish them and care for them, so that they may be instruments useful for God's service for such years as may be given to us. We do not neglect or despise them because they are so transient. So also with the social, political and cultural products of our thought and labour. We are right to recognize that politics will not solve the world's problems. But we would be wrong if we concluded that politics are not part of the substance of Christian discipleship.

'[God's Kingdom is] the proper horizon of all our actions here and now.' Carefully understood, that sentence could be the lodestar for the immensely exciting project we are engaged upon at Westminster Abbey. Let me tell you about it, because the story is so much more informative and, frankly, interesting, than any theory I might develop about the nature of Faith's engagement with public life, or the place of religion in the public square.

It is a splendid bit of geographical reality that Britain's public square, that is, the square where its public is served at the most concentrated and high level, is the Abbey's home on Parliament Square in London. Here we have the Legislature, the Houses of Parliament, on the east side, adjacent to the River Thames. Working our way round anti-clockwise, on the north side, we have the huge eighteenth century Treasury building, with the equally grand Foreign and Commonwealth Office behind it, and most of the other Government Departments, plus 10 Downing Street, taking their place behind them. On the north side, then, we have the Executive. On the west side sits the Supreme Court, the Judiciary. Legislature, Executive, Judiciary. And on the south side, there for a thousand years of prayer, contemplation, praise, penitence, celebration and mourning, sits Westminster Abbey. Without saying a word, Christianity has its place in the public square, visibly, beautifully, quietly.

Westminster Abbey Institute is the answer to the question: well and good, oh Abbey, you are a beautiful backdrop for the machinery of Government to whirr and click and enact its dramas in front of, but what are you actually doing that might be recognizably public service?

The Abbey already performs public service through its religious services, the worship that takes place daily, monastery-fashion, from morning prayer and eucharist at 7.30, noontime eucharist, and evensong at 5pm, day by every day, and more on Sundays. Then there are the numerous special services for national and international occasions and institutions: coronations, royal weddings, state visits, the openings of Parliament and the Judicial year, in times of national mourning and of celebration. To call the nation to prayer at these times is indeed a public service. And the Abbey is good at welcoming people of all faiths and none to such national events. It has been particularly attentive to the many faiths represented in the Commonwealth and holds a 'Commonwealth Celebration' act of worship on Commonwealth Day in which leaders of the world faiths pray in the Abbey alongside each other. Over the year, millions attend worship at the Abbey.

Then there is the public service of preserving an ancient heritage for the nation. The fabric of the Abbey buildings and treasures has to be conserved and shown, and the national story represented by the 3,300 people buried and memorialized there has to be told. Elizabeth I and Mary Tudor buried together by James I, united by death as they certainly were not in life. Oliver Cromwell, marked but no longer buried: as a regicide at the Restoration, he was

disinterred, hung, drawn and quartered, three years after he was buried. Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Lister, Herschel and Hooker, to name a few scientists. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Garrick, Dylan Thomas, TS Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens, to name some poets, playwrights and storytellers. Handel, Purcell, Vaughn Williams and Stanford, among our musicians. Numerous Prime Ministers and other statespeople. I'm pleased to say, not a few women amongst those memorialized in the Abbey. These stories, held in the stones of the Abbey, must be preserved and told afresh for each generation, and we welcome over a million visitors a year in order to do so.

But this is not enough. Or rather, the Abbey has more to give public life and public service, and Westminster Abbey Institute, of which I am the founder-Director, is the vehicle the Dean and Chapter has determined should be the means. Here is the crucible in which spirituality is translated into service, where moral and spiritual virtues in public life are attended to, encouraged, revitalized, where the thousand years of reflection, contemplation and prayer that has taken place within the Abbey enclosure can be offered, sacrificially, to all public servants of goodwill. These are, literally, our neighbours, and we are called to love them. A principle of missionary work applies: we do not come to bring God to our neighbours, but to find God among them.

Westminster Abbey Institute was, then, launched in November 2013 to revitalize moral and spiritual values in public life, working with the public service institutions around Parliament Square, and drawing on its Benedictine resources of spirituality and scholarship.

How were we going to do this? Without having those words exactly, Lesslie's 'proper horizon' has been the syntax in our minds. We knew, when we started, what we were not: a think tank with specific policy proposals; commentators on the ills of Government and politicians; we had no campaign about which to beat drums nor soap boxes to stand upon and shout. Instinctively we knew we were not there to criticize, and we knew we were not cynical about our public service institutions. But – and this really matters for Westminster Abbey – nor were we to find ourselves acting by default like fawning courtiers to the Establishment. We knew we did not need to be apologists for religion in the public square. We did not need to say that we should be there. Quite apart from actually physically being there, we knew, again instinctively, that we needed to embody our contribution to public service, not try and argue for it.

So we knew what we were not. We have learned who we are, or rather we are learning who we are, by reference to three things. First, we are learning whom we serve and those (they are the same people and institutions) who are our partners. With whom are we working to discover and orient ourselves towards that 'proper horizon'? In short, 'who is my neighbour?' A pertinent question given the geography of the situation. And of course, given the geography, we are there for everyone around and near Parliament Square. So we have focused our programmes and events, and all our advertising, on the thousands of public servants in the several institutions around the Square, not just the Legislature, Judiciary and Executive, but also the Metropolitan Police, the London District of the Army, the Royal Society (for science, founded by our own Isaac Newton and Christopher Wren), the National Galleries for the arts, academia in the form of King's College, London, and so on (we keep

finding new ones, all a stone's throw away from the Abbey). This focus has been tremendously helpful. It has been possible to develop programmes that address the interests and circumstances of public servants very directly, and we have been rewarded with full houses of audiences of which at least 80% are public servants in the strict definition of the term – the other 20% tend to be teachers, healthcare workers, clergy, academics. So 100% servants, really.

Our launch programme in Autumn 2013 was called 'Telling the Truth' and included an event in which a politician, a journalist, a scientist and a poet spoke about what truth was for them. Our spring programme 2014, 'Feeding the Soul', offered a series of lectures on growing moral courage in public life. Autumn 2014, in recognition of the anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, looked at the moral complexity of the decision to go to war 100 years ago and today, and the operational consequences of the political decision so to do. Spring 2015 was 'Stand and be Counted' (because we had a General Election coming up) and public servants had the opportunity to consider how it is that one goes into public life with great idealism and finds, inevitably, that as soon as one tries to do anything to change things for the better, one has to compromise. This coming autumn the programme is entitled 'In Power?' and we have dialogues on the balance of power around Parliament Square with senior politicians, civil servants and a Justice of the Supreme Court. Next spring, we will present the Benedictine virtues of stability, community and the conversion of manners. And so on.

Second, we are learning how to point out that 'proper horizon', without prior definitions (or it would be a horizon limited by our own imaginations). This is a subtle task. Of course we can do it implicitly or explicitly in the themed programmes over which we exercise control: the speakers can and do introduce theological themes and translate them into meaningful learning about the true nature of service. But the real task, it seems to me, is not to bring the truth to the Square, as if it were not there before, and dump it on people, expecting them to gasp with astonishment and delight and thank us for pointing out what they had, strangely, never seen before. To 'find God' in the public square is not to find God for ourselves, though it includes that, it is to *see together*. One imagines standing shoulder to shoulder with our neighbours, all looking towards that proper horizon, and being delighted and amazed together.

I have spent a lot of time making friends with my neighbours. Out of those friendships we have developed a responsive, ad hoc, Parliament Square programme which are joint endeavours that address the deep moral challenges underlying policy-making, and the necessary disposition of the public servant needing to address those challenges.

Our method is first to offer a Benedictine context. That is, we offer conversation that locates itself in stability, community and the conversion of manners. We will sit down with a group of, say, senior Civil Servants in a specific Government Department, or the Police, or the Army, or more recently Members of Parliament and the House of Lords, and together we will devise a seminar for their department or group which will look at the good that the department or group is trying to do. What is significant and distinctive is that the psychological and philosophical location of the conversation is deep. That depth is also physically expressed by the location of the seminars we offer, which is the Jerusalem

Chamber. Here King Henry IV died and Henry V became King, and the King James Version of the Bible was finalised, and the Westminster Confession was signed. The Jerusalem Chamber is part of the Abbot's and then the Dean's lodging, a space where spiritual and worldly do not separate.

I was set a great example of how to 'do' depth by Rowan Williams when he was the interlocutor for a series of four public conversations at St Paul's Cathedral at the launch of our sister St Paul's Institute, taking in turn global economy, ecology, governance and health, and asking the experts in those fields questions which immediately drew them into a consideration of the philosophical and even theological underlying currents of the subjects. (In whose service is a global economy? Who and what is included in ecology? What is the relationship between autonomy and governance? Is happiness part of the definition of health?) The Church of England bishops did a similar thing with genetics experts when they spent a day learning about the subject. (What does genetics determine? How is humanity defined in the light of this?) There were really good questions, and ones that practitioners, officials, public servants often don't have time to ask, but they are the most important questions because they lead us into our spiritual humanity.

A recent example of our own: we were sitting around the table in the Permanent Secretary's office of a Government Department, discussing a forthcoming seminar for the Department. One of the Civil Servants spoke about how too often officials in the Department will apply formulaic approaches, such as the benefit-cost ratio, in a way that masks or even undermines vital human qualities such as empathy and humility. That became a key focus at the ensuing Jerusalem Chamber seminar and thereafter. Importantly, the words and the disposition for the event came from the Civil Servants, not from the Abbey Institute. We are not functioning on the Square to tell others what the Good is. It emerges in the encounter.

So the conversation is located in a Benedictine place (in a way, for a short while, that Permanent Secretary's office became a Benedictine space). First, it is *stable*, it is safe here, and here is not going to go away, it's an historical place where we can feel our own passing, gain a perspective on our place in history. Second, it is a place of *community*, which means that we are gathered in goodwill together, seeking the good together, united in our efforts and made companions in our purpose, not by any means agreeing with each other but feeling safe with each other. As a community of goodwill we feel it is safe to get things wrong, to take time to form conscience, to work things out. And of course we operate to the Chatham House rule. Third, we are about the *conversion of manners*. We expect transformation to take place though we don't necessarily know what it will be. Broadly, though, borrowing from Philip Shepherd, we will be looking for moves:

From self-consciousness to mutual awareness  
From doing to being  
From self-achieved independence to self-achieved submission  
From enclosure to receptivity  
From knowing to feeling  
From self-conflict to grace  
From idea to energy

From regulatory systems to responsiveness  
From coarseness to subtlety  
From rules to principles<sup>1</sup>

And I don't mind admitting that this transformation is probably only realised after the talking is over and everyone has gone to evensong and then wandered around the Abbey in the semi-dark and silence of the close of the day – and had a glass of wine back in the Jerusalem Chamber!

In agreeing that we are a community of goodwill seeking to articulate the Good I have offered an analogy from sailing that works well. A Government Department can be imagined as a sailing boat. At the helm stands the Permanent Secretary, who, like all good helmsmen, seeks never to steer the boat more than five degrees either side of the compass direction upon which the boat is set. Civil Servants in the Department form the crew, from the navigator who must know the course and ensure the helmsman anticipates obstacles, to the scrubber of decks who ensures no one slips up. All play their part in ensuring the boat remains shipshape and able to withstand the waves and the winds in travelling its appointed course.

The waves are the events of the nation and the world. They may be relatively calm or they may rise into steep and stormy mountains of water, threatening the stability of the boat.

The winds are public opinion, which can fill the sails of the boat and send it scudding on its chosen course. They can gust and buffet, interrupting the boat's smooth journey. Or they can blow adversely, threatening to push the boat off course altogether.

Hence, the helmsman cannot simply hold the tiller fixedly. He or she must constantly respond and adjust to the wind and the waves, aiming to keep within five degrees either side of the compass direction or risk increasingly over-compensatory swings away from the course of travel.

The compass point towards which the boat is sailing is The Good. As such, it is not a destination; the journey is the thing, the direction of travel the concern, not the arrival.

By whom is The Good defined? It is true that the Government Minister is granted that responsibility and privilege by virtue of having been elected by universal franchise. But in defining The Good, Ministers have to have their Party's support. And of course the strength of the prevailing wind, public opinion, may be such as to determine a change of compass direction altogether. For the politician, public opinion will set parameters on what he or she can achieve. The great political leader will have a vision of the Good that transcends narrow-minded concerns but retains Party support, and respects the parameters set by the prevailing wind of public opinion. The visionary and skilled politician will learn, quite possibly from his or her Civil Servants, about the art of tacking.

Because of course it is the helmsman and the crew who execute the tack, and any other sailing manoeuvres required. The Civil Service crew, having gathered the evidence – sniffed the wind, watched the waves – will need to be able to tell Ministers when their proposed

direction of travel will not work: when, whatever the Ministers might want to think, their proposed direction is possibly not towards The Good. Thus the Good is sought by all.

And in passing, if one imagines Whitehall as a fleet of boats, those, too, will need to be taken into account by the helmsman. But – and it is a wonderful sight – sailing boats, journeying as a fleet in the same direction across the waves, subject to the same wind, stay uniform distances apart.

Having established a common concern with identifying the Good, seated in our Benedictine space, we then spend time as moral philosophers, looking at the specifics of the policy drivers for a given Government Department. Our analysis is rigorous, using the method I developed in the Centre of Medical Law and Ethics at King's College, London, under Ian Kennedy, in the 1990s.

We use the three broad approaches that moral philosophers have taken over the centuries as they have sought to determine what is good. These we have called goal-based, duty-based and right-based, following Dworkin<sup>2</sup>, Botros<sup>3</sup> and Foster<sup>4</sup>. Very briefly and broadly, a goal-based thinker will see the good of an action in its consequences rather than in the content of the action itself; a duty-based thinker will look at the action and judge it according to pre-existing moral rules; and a right-based thinker will judge the action according to the views of those most affected by it. The *goal-based* approach is valid insofar as it is the case that we rarely act without some end in view and it is right to consider whether that end is a good one. The goal-based approach is limited in that even very desirable goals should not justify actions which in themselves are intrinsically nasty. The ends are important moral considerations but they don't justify the means. Morality is not a mathematical exercise. The *duty-based* approach is valid in that it makes us think hard about what we are doing rather than merely why we are doing it, recalibrating the needle of our moral compass, making us morally sensitive rather than mathematically certain. The duty-based approach is limited because it can blind us to important consequences (Kant would have us truthfully respond to a murderer seeking her prey); and it is limited because it can make us arrogant: concerned only with our own place in heaven earned by doing the right thing, regardless of its effect or the views of others (the poor soul who will be murdered because Kant refused to tell a lie, or the patient who wants his life support switched off and we refuse to take a life). The *right-based* approach is valid because it requires us to listen to others, it makes us community-minded instead of purist. It is limited because on its own it would make someone's request, for example, to take their life, right with no other consideration except that it is their wish.

All three approaches are needed. They conflict, they make us think, they require sensitive responses, honest appraisal, self-awareness because we will temperamentally favour one approach over the others, but taken together they form a three-legged stool that stands firm, if the legs are all of the same length, even on rocky ground.

So the Parliament Square programme tries to bring about a sense of us all around the Square thinking deeply and rigorously, facing the proper horizon together, exclaiming together when its bright wisdom emerges and calls us beyond our quotidian selves.

Third, having found our neighbours, oriented ourselves together with them towards the proper horizon, we needed to think about how we were going to take steps forwards. Although our themed programmes and our ad hoc Parliament Square Programme could be deemed successful because they attract good audiences, good both in terms of size and of calibre, and the feedback is great, it turned out there was more we could do to dig deeper into the heart of what it is to be a public servant, to serve, to answer the call to public office.

We created a Council of Reference right at the beginning of the Institute's establishment, whose first meeting was on the day of the formal launch in November 2013. The members of the Council are all senior public servants, at or just beyond retirement: the Lord Chief Justice; the Lord Speaker; the former head of MI5 (Homeland Security); the President of the Royal Society; the Director of the National Portrait Gallery (you will begin to recognize the list from the institutes I mentioned above); the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police; the head of Home Affairs of the BBC; two academic theologians; private secretary to the Queen; and so on. They are, needless to say, mostly in their 60s and 70s, and they are, sad to say, mostly white men. Pretty much the first thing they said to us when we met on the day of our birth was that we should ensure those we reach are younger than they. So we invited each of them to nominate one younger public servant, who was a few decades behind them in seniority. And thus was the Fellows programme born. A really impressive group of 30 – 40 somethings from the different fields represented on our Council of Reference has been convened. The Fellows participate in a series of seminars and events to gain an integrated understanding of the role of moral and spiritual values in public life, character formation and career development. The cohort of Fellows should emerge as 'communities of goodwill' and go on to support each other, and to retain relationships with the Institute as alumni as their careers develop. We expect our Fellows to become integrated, fearless leaders, supporting each other and maintaining their links with the Abbey, united in their aim to serve the common good. The Fellows' Programme helps future leaders locate and connect with their own internal strength, resilience, moral sensitivity and compass.

The year ends with a retreat, and I come fresh from the first one, last weekend, held at Sarum College in Salisbury. Over the weekend we explored our own and our institutions' journeys using the Joseph Campbell 'Hero's Journey' framework<sup>5</sup>. The main protagonist hears a call to leave her ordinary world in which she felt she was 'living life holding on to the sides' (Alice Thomas Ellis), initially refusing the call through fear but, meeting her mentor, finds the courage to cross the threshold into the unknown. This is the baptism. She begins a journey. This is the incarnate ministry. On the journey she faces trials, learns who her allies are and who her enemies, and comes to a time of real darkness and loneliness in which everything has gone wrong and everyone has deserted her, but she has gone too far on her journey to think of returning and in any case, 'if you are going through hell, keep going' (Winston Churchill). This is the Garden of Gethsemane. Then follows the great ordeal, towards which the whole journey has been heading, through which she passes to claim her prize. This is the crucifixion-resurrection. But the biggest prize, and possibly surprise, is the feeling of anti-climax, and so the final stage on the journey is the new level of life, in which the journey begins again, but the hero is now a servant leader, having had the courage and conviction within herself tested and not found wanting. These, then, are the actual steps towards Lesslie's proper horizon that we are taking.



I have concluded that the Fellows' Programme is not so much a course in leadership as one in servanthood.

To sum up, Westminster Abbey Institute advertises itself and offers themed programmes to its immediate neighbours, the public servants around and near Parliament Square in London. It points towards the 'proper horizon' of God's kingdom by looking for it together with its public service neighbours. Finally it has started taking steps towards the proper horizon with its Fellows' Programme, working closely and deeply with a group of younger public servants to help them connect with their own strength and joy, and creating a community of goodwill.

Lesslie Newbigin reminds us of the joy of evangelism. It is not a duty, it is the shout of delight when one has found something unutterably irresistible. And I am bound to confess that my work often feels like a shout of joy because I am so often at or moving towards the place in the public servant where they are most energetic, delighted, interested, where their vocation to public service is being rekindled and their work is taking on renewed meaning. This means I am nearly always in the finest company.

Thank you very much.

<sup>1</sup> Philip Shepherd, *New Self, New World: recovering our senses in the twenty-first century*, (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books) 2010 (p 282)

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press) 1977

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Botros and Claire Foster, 'The moral responsibilities of research ethics committees', in *Dispatches*, 3:3, Summer, 1993

<sup>4</sup> Claire Foster, *The Ethics of Medical Research on Humans*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2001

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 1972