Being Christian

Meditations on a Pilgrimage to Armenia
September 2018

Canon Peter Sills

September 18 – Tbilisi

Pilgrimage

Acts 16.6–15 Come over to Macedonia

Pilgrimage is a journey made with others – to a holy place, along a holy path, or with a holy purpose. We may not know exactly why we are making the journey, but we ask God and our companions to to go with us, to open our eyes and our understanding, so that we travel as pilgrims and not just as tourists.

In the reading we heard how St Paul was guided by the Spirit: 'Cross over to Macedonia and help us.' So we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us in our journey. When Paul arrived in Macedonia, Lydia from Thyatira opened her heart in response to his message and welcomed him into her house, so we pray that our hearts may be open to God, and to all that this land and its people will teach us, and that we will welcome one another as companions as we journey together.

We share the Peace.

September 19 – Odzoun

Origins

2 Kings 3.9–20 Elisha and the three kings & the water
Acts 17.1–12 Paul meets opposition in Thessalonica

On this pilgrimage we are travelling together through the first country to adopt Christianity as the state religion. It is said by some to be the single most important event in Armenian history. The date when this came about is uncertain – the generally accepted date is AD 301; but whatever the date, by then there was already a Christian presence here. Legend has it that Christianity arrived not long after the resurrection, and that it was brought by St Bartholomew and St Thaddeus, two of Jesus' apostles. Adopting a religion says something basic about who we are; it is, or ought to be, more than a mere badge; it is a mark of identity. What we worship gives us our vision and determines our values. And so as we travel, I shall offer some reflections inspired by the story of Armenia about what it means to find our identity in Christ.

I begin by thinking about origins. Origins are important; we want to know where we have come from. The popularity of the BBC series *Who do you think you are?* attests to the basic nature of this universal human desire. Armenians trace their origins back to Haik, the great-great-grandson of Noah. The Armenian name for their land is Hayastan, which means the Land of Haik. Haik is not mentioned in the Bible, but his father Togarmah is listed as one of the grandsons of Japheth who was Noah's youngest son *(Genesis 10.3)*. Given that until recently Mount Ararat was situated in Armenia, it is not surprising that Armenians take the story of Noah as the beginning of their own story. In the Bible the story of life as we know it begins with Noah. Before Noah the Genesis story is quite primitive. As in the Greek myths, the sons of the gods descend to earth and have children

with the daughters of mortals. The people follow their own desires, and God is so appalled by the wickedness of humankind that he resolves to wipe them from the face of the earth, which is accomplished through the flood. Only the righteous man Noah – described as 'the one blameless man of his time,' who 'walked with God' – together with his wife and sons survive. It is through Noah and his descendants that the earth is re-populated, and God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants, and all with every living creature, that never again will there be a flood to lay waste the earth. The rainbow is the sign of this covenant.

In every age God raises up people like Noah who walk with him, or as we might say today, are on God's wavelength. In ancient Israel Elisha was one of them. His picture of God was primitive. As we heard in the first reading, he believes God to be one who decrees that the three kings will triumph over their enemies, razing to the ground every town and city. This picture is not consistent with the picture of God that we see in Jesus. It is an early episode in an unfolding story in which the picture of God changes. The story in which we discover who we are in terms of faith is not static and unchanging; the picture of God in the Bible changes as the story unfolds, but throughout it there is the acknowledgement that God's story is also our story. Like Elisha and the kings, we need to do our best to find our part in it. St Paul is perhaps the best example of what this might involve, not least in terms of coming to a new picture of God. His picture of God, and the whole of his life, was literally turned around when he saw the light on the Damascus Road. Finding his place in the story brought struggle and conflict. Continually, he came up against the opposition that new ideas always encounter, as, for example at Thessalonica. But he was not dissuaded nor discouraged as a follower of Jesus, and that, I think, was because in his faith he had found his true self.

So who do we think we are? Where do we find ourselves in the story? Adopting Christianity as the basis of our spiritual identity, implies a willingness to let the life and teaching of Jesus shape our picture of God, as it did for St Paul, and also a willingness to adjust our lives accordingly so that they reflect the values and attitudes that Jesus embodied.

September 20 – Haghpat

Conversion

Ephesians 4.1–6, 11–16 Growing up into the full stature of Christ
John 14.23–26 those who love me, heed me/advocate will come

When Armenia adopted Christianity a big change in social customs was required. Pagan beliefs with their superstitious ideas of divinity and easy-going morality had to give way to new different conceptions of God and a strict moral code. This kind of basic cultural change takes a long time. Over 400 years later, in 768, it was still necessary for a Church Council to condemn polygamy as a mortal sin. Accepting Christ as our saviour is one thing; true conversion, that is changing our lives to live as Jesus did, is another. Even St Paul took time to adjust – several months, possibly several years, elapsed between his conversion and the beginning of his ministry. In the Early Church a period of three years was often required for preparation for baptism, so great was the social and moral change involved. An entire section of Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, no less than five chapters (chs. 7 – 11), deals with the behaviour an attitudes required of those who have turned to Christ.

It is different today. By and large, we sit light to the idea of conversion of values and attitudes. It is generally assumed that conventional attitudes and values are indeed Christian attitudes and values, and that baptism requires no great conversion of life. This would have cut no ice with Paul. He describes the goal of the Christian life in the Letter to the Ephesians as attaining a mature humanity measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ *(Eph 4.13).* As we heard in the gospel, those who truly love the Lord will heed what he said, and if we do, then we can be confident, that true to his promise he will send his Spirit to be our guide.

As the Armenians discovered when it was decreed that they would accept Jesus as Lord, the source of hope and the fount of virtue, if this was to be more than a change of badge and be a change of identity, then a deep conversion of heart and mind, of life and being, was required. It challenges us today to ask ourselves what it means for each of us to be a Christian in today's world. What change of life is still required of us?

September 21 – Geghard / Yerevan

Proverbs 3.13–18 Happy is he who has found wisdom

Wisdom

The faith of Armenia has been largely shaped and preserved in its monasteries that are all over this land. One way of understanding the monastic calling, particularly in the Orthodox tradition, is the pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom in this sense is not the practical wisdom of everyday life, but the source of life and truth. The Bible identifies wisdom with the Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation and brought forth life, and St John

affirms that Jesus is the human face of that creative power, the Word that was in the beginning.

When Jesus stood before Pilate, Pilate asked dismissively: 'What is truth?' The truth stood before him. For Christians, truth is not to be found in a philosophy or manifesto, but in a person. St John describes Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, or the true and living way. Those who seek wisdom will find the way to it through following him who is the source of truth, like the monks who lived here at Geghard. The Indian theologian, Raimon Panikkar, spoke of wisdom as the ability to orient oneself in any given context, a sophos is a 'good navigator.' The way of wisdom is not about controlling or dominating but orienting oneself, sailing safely into harbour. 'The attitude behind this approach,' says Panikkar, 'is certainly not the typical masculine one of wanting to grasp, apprehend, dominate, and even know, but rather of being grasped, being known and assimilated.' To my mind, this suggests something akin to the path of love, trusting in and allowing another to shape one's life. Allowing Christ to do this is to follow the path of wisdom.

Religion, Identity and Culture

2 Cor 4.1–6 We never lose heart / glory of God in face of Jesus
Matt 9.9–13 Call of Matthew / I came to call sinners

This land and the whole Caucasian region has been fought over for centuries. It was particularly bad in C18th, and the conflict has continued until recent times. Today, Armenia's borders with both Turkey and Azerbaijan are closed. The conflict is tragic, but not surprising; this is where three great empires meet: originally Persian, Russian and Ottoman; today Iranian, Russian and Turkish; and in each case with a different

religious identity: formerly Zoroastrian, Christian and Muslim; now Shi'a Muslim, Christian and Sunni Muslim. The conflict is and always has been about security, resources and power, but always with a religious element. There seems to be an religious imperative: once we believe that we have found the truth, it must be communicated to all people. In its more extreme form this imperative requires that others must be made to accept our faith. Both Christianity and Islam have exhibited this extreme and violent form of evangelism. It is, I think, also about social control, part of the battle for hearts and minds upon which all forms of political control ultimately rest.

Religion so easily becomes a badge, as I saw with my own eyes when I visited Northern Ireland in 1992. Fences, kerb stones, telegraph poles were painted either red, white and blue, or green, white and orange depending on whether you were in a nationalist/protestant district or a republican/catholic district. When religion becomes a tribal badge, its values are negated. In Hungary Viktor Orban says he is defending the Christian character of the nation while denying its values. The hostility towards strangers is one example. A new law requiring the state to 'defend Christian culture', makes it illegal to sleep on the streets and to provide help for unregistered migrants and asylum seekers. One Hungarian bishop has been sharply critical: 'We all share responsibility for the homeless,' he said. 'God loves all his children equally and looks sadly at how we misunderstand each other.' Of course immigration creates problems; there are practical limits to the number of newcomers a country can absorb; integration is a slow process. But in devising policies to deal with it the crucial question is where you start from. In Germany Angela Merkel started from the Christian principle of welcoming those in need; Viktor Orban from keeping them out. In the USA President Trump wants to build a wall; Pope Francis spoke pointedly about building bridges.

So the history of this region with its religious identity bound up in the political struggle, challenges us to ask whether our faith is more than a national or cultural badge. More sharply, it challenges us to ask whether our religion shapes our politics, or whether our politics shape our religion. St Paul speaks of the importance of declaring the truth openly, not veiling the message of the gospel. For him, Christ was the starting point. It is he who is the light who shows us the way.

September 22 – Yerevan

ARMENIAN CHURCH

2 Kings 4.8–17 Elisha and the Shunamite woman
Acts 18.1–11 Paul goes to Corinth / God assures He is with him

The adoption of Christianity came after King Trdat was healed by St Gregory the Illuminator. It might have been an act of gratitude on the part of the king for his healing, or like Constantine, a recognition that the God of the Christians was his protector and deliverer. Whatever the reason it was a statement of identity and allegiance. In ancient Rome adherence to the state religion – sacrificing to the gods, etc. – showed that you were a true Roman, that you accepted the status quo, that you belonged. Adopting Christianity was the mark of a new status quo, a different form of belonging.

The social advantages of a common religious identity, particularly from the point of view of the government, are clear. There has to be some level of accepted values if there is to be peace and order in society, and religion is a powerful determinant of values and attitudes. Even in today's secular

world an equivalent form of social control is found in ideas like political correctness. The problem comes when religion is expected to serve the interests of the state, and the two are bound together in a Faustian bargain, with the Church being expected to bless state policy in return for state privileges and protection of the Church.

Christians have struggled with this. Too close an identity and the Church loses its edge. The Russian author, Vasily Grossman, on a visit to Armenia in the Soviet era, met the Catholicos, the head of the Armenian Church. His expectations were rather different to the reality. He had been agitated at the prospect of meeting a prophet, 'a religious leader whose inner life determined his every word, movement and look. … But,' he writes, 'there was nothing [like this] about the man I was talking to. He was intelligent, educated and worldly. An enlightened worldliness was, in fact, his most striking quality.' Much the same could be said about many Anglican and Catholic bishops, and when a new leader arrives with a distinctively Christian agenda, like Pope Francis, we are reminded that the Church offers a different vision to enlightened worldliness and its politically correct status quo.

Christian values and attitudes pose some basic challenges to the way things are. For example, Christian see leaders as the servants of those whom they lead, not as powerful, dominating figures. Christians measure the justice of a society by the state of the poor, not by the general level of prosperity; and we see freedom as including the ability to enjoy certain rights, like good housing and health care, and not simply following one's own desires free from restraint or coercion. It is values and attitudes like these which should be the mark of a Christian state if its Christianity is to be more than a badge, and they pose a challenge to the politics of both the right and of the left alike.

September 23 – Hripsime / Echmiadzin / Zvartnots

God and Man?

Jeremiah 11.18–20 I have been led like a lamb to the slaughter
Colossians 2.1–10 Don't be carried away by delusive speculations
Mark 9.30–37 The Son of Man is to be handed over/Who is the greatest

Early in its life the Armenian Church was caught up in the conflict that consumed the whole Church about the nature of Jesus. All were agreed that in him both humanity and divinity met; the question was How?

The conviction that he was both God and Man arose out of experience. His suffering on the cross was all too human, agonisingly articulated in his cry of dereliction: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' On the other hand, his miraculous powers, which extended to raising the dead, his authoritative teaching, and his claim to have the power to forgive sins, pointed to someone in whom divinity was manifest. Those close to him were clear that in him they experienced something greater than the merely human. They became convinced, as St Paul put it, that 'in Christ the Godhead in all its fullness dwells embodied.' How could someone be both human and divine? The Early Church had to find a way of explaining the dual nature of Christ if Christianity was not to be reduced to another mystery religion, with, in St Paul's words, their 'hollow and delusive speculations, based on human teaching and centered on the elemental spirits of the universe.' *(Col. 2.8)* The controversy that this quest for an explanation generated continued over several centuries; it was passionate, divisive, partisan, and at times violent, and its outcome shaped the character of the Armenian Church to this day.

Essentially, there were two views: on the one hand there were the monophysites, who said that the union of the two natures resulted in a

single nature which is divine; and on the other hand there were the dyophysites who said that the two natures remained separate, co-existing in the one person. The controversy was the main concern at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which issued a formula designed to end the controversy, but which fell well short of an explanation. It merely affirmed, in various ways, that Christ was both truly God and truly man, of one substance with the Father. The Chalcedonian formula was generally accepted, but some Churches, known as the Oriental Orthodox Churches, dissented, and the Armenian Church was one of them. As a result these Churches are not in communion with the other orthodox Churches, nor with Rome.

It is impossible to explain the argument in simple terms; it depends on the subtlety of Greek thought and vocabulary, for which there are no adequate Latin equivalents. To many, if not most people it will be incomprehensible that reasonable people were consumed by this kind of theological dispute. If we are all agreed that Jesus is both human and divine, why fall out over the minutiae of how we explain it? It is more comprehensible when we realise that to a great extent the dispute was about power, rather than faith. Each side was associated with one of the two most influential Eastern Churches, Alexandria and Antioch, and the rivalry between them fuelled the fire. The rival theories became badges of allegiance, propositions to be defended, than a genuine search for truth. As one scholar said, 'There were terrible moments of fanaticism and intrigue, and far too much controversy for its own sake conducted by men whose natural superiority to scruple was enhanced by the feeling that that in the party they were defending, the cause of God was at stake.' In the controversy questions of permanent importance for Christian theology were easily lost sight of: 'Did the Lord, to whom and through whom Christians pray, pray himself?' *(Henry Chadwick, The Early Church, p. 211)*

The question is basic to how we understand Jesus. Do we put him on a divine pedestal, beyond us, with no need to pray himself? Or is he more like a brother beside us, our partner in prayer? When religion is no more than a badge, then questions like these are irrelevant, lost in the struggle for power. But if our religion is part of our identity, then they are basic: Who is Jesus for us? How do we understand the meaning of his life?

I doubt whether the Church will ever reach agreement on these fine theological points. To those who argue endlessly, Jesus' rebuke to the disciples when they were disputing among themselves about who was the greatest, is appropriate. he said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.' *(Mark 9.35)* This is God speaking of the love of God. However we seek to explain the combination of humanity and divinity that we experience in Jesus, the more important thing is to learn from his love and show it to the world.

September 24 – Genocide Memorial

GENOCIDE

Matt 5.43–end Love your enemies

Although the desire to exterminate enemies has been around a long time, genocide as a concept is a recent idea. As defined by the UN Genocide Convention it is more extensive than exterminating another race or nation in whole or in part, it also includes eliminating their culture whilst leaving the people alive. And that was basic to the Armenian genocide. I spoke yesterday about love; genocide is the most appalling example of the

annihilation of love; it denies another's humanity and right to exist. It is appalling that religious people, *e.g. ISIS,* can believe that this is right.

The Turks bear most of the blame for the Armenian Genocide, but others, including Britain, which had become a power in the region, were involved. At the end of the war between Russia and Turkey in 1878, in which Russia was victorious, three treaties were signed. The first transferred large areas of Anatolia to Russia. In the second Britain promised to protect Turkey against further Russian aggression and in return required Turkey to agree with Britain measures to protect Christians living in the Ottoman territories, particular Armenia. The third treaty restored to Turkey large areas of land conceded in the first treaty. It also included a promise by Turkey to protect Christians as before, but crucially those measures no longer had to be agreed with Britain. This removal of pressure on the Sultan had disastrous consequences, culminating in the genocide of 1915.

RECONCILIATION

Micah 4.1–4 Swords into ploughshares
2 Corinthians 5.14–20

This part of the world has been fought over continually, as the rival empires have sought to impose their rule and culture on its peoples. In this land it is hard to avoid the question of how we treat people who are different. The answer today seems increasingly to be to reject them, and, by the extreme right, also to demonise them. Genocide lies at the end of this road.

The whole of Judaeo-Christian tradition cries out against this. Jews are required to remember that once they were enslaved in Egypt from where God liberated them. They are to show the same concern for the oppressed

that God showed for them; they are to welcome the vulnerable and rejected; the stranger, the widow and the orphan. (That they forgot this when they became established in the Promised Land does not negate the principle.) God requires his people to respect the humanity of others, and the same attitude towards those who are different has passed into Christianity. If a state calls itself Christian, then this is one of the crucial issues it needs to address.

Jesus came to call Israel back to the right way. As the prophet Micah declared, swords must be beaten into ploughshares; war and violence must be disowned. Rejecting the stranger and those whose ways are different is not the way of Christ. One of the first convictions of the early Church was that Jesus had not died just for the Jews, but for all peoples. The Christian vision is not of a future characterised by walls of separation, but of bridges of friendship; its vision is of a new humanity in which all are embraced and difference and diversity are celebrated. This was the hope that St Paul held out to the gentiles: 'Once you were far off, but now in union with Christ Jesus you have been brought near through the shedding of Christ's blood. For he is himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one, and in his own body of flesh and blood has broken down the barrier of enmity which separated them…' *(Ephesians 2.13–14)*

St Paul saw reconciliation as *the* work of God in Christ, and also as *the* basic task of the Church: 'All this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has enlisted us in this ministry of reconciliation: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, no longer holding people's misdeeds against them, and has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation.' (*2 Corinthians 5.18–19)*

St Paul's great insight is that reconciliation is a divine gift, not a human achievement. It is by opening ourselves to receive this gift that we will be

reconciled. Robert Schreiter, an American theologian, points to the difference between reconciliation and conciliation, a process of conflict mediation whose goal is to lessen conflict, to broker a compromise, which will enable those at difference to find a way forward and live with their differences. Reconciliation, he says, has a more fundamental character: it is not about finding a way around differences, but of finding a way to transcend them. Basic to this, I think, is putting oneself in the place of those who are different and trying to see the world through their eyes. Thus we acknowledge their humanity, and to put it on a par with our own. As Schreiter says, reconciliation 'never takes us back to where we were before. It is more than the removal of suffering for the victim and conversion for the oppressor. Reconciliation takes us to a new place.' *(Reconciliation, p. 55-56)* As St Paul said, when we are united in Christ 'there is a new creation; the old order has gone; a new order has already begun.' *(2 Cor. 5.17)* This is the truth that needs to be asserted against those who would lead us down the path that leads to genocide.

September 25 – Khor Virap / Noravank

Mount Ararat

Gen 7.1–7 + 7.24–8.5 Noah and the Flood

In this story we see an early picture of God, moved by anger at the depravity of the nations and determined to destroy them and start again. It is an interesting idea that God did not get it right the first time, and had to have another go! It underlines the primitive nature of the story, and this is one of the pictures of God that the Bible corrects as history unfolds. The

high point in the OT is the vision of Isaiah of Babylon, who saw that God took the suffering of his people on to himself – a vision that was fulfilled in Jesus.

St Gregory's Cell

2 Cor 4.1–12 We proclaim Xt / treasure in earthen vessels

Gregory was of noble descent, his father being a Prince of the ruling royal house. When he was young, Gregory was caught up in a dynastic struggle and narrowly escaped death. He was taken to Caesarea in Cappadocia, where he was raised as a Christian by a priest. He married; had two sons; but at some time he and his wife separated to allow Gregory to follow the monastic life. He returned to Armenia hoping to atone for his father's part in the family feud by evangelising his homeland. King Trdat had other plans. Recognising Gregory as the son of his enemy he had him imprisoned in a snake-infested pit here at Khor Virap for 12 years – the monastery came later. However, things did not go well for the king. He was betrayed by the Roman Emperor Diocletian and lost his reason. Gregory was summoned to cure him. Restored to his right mind, the king was baptised and issued a decree authorising Gregory to begin the conversion of the entire nation. The following year Gregory was consecrated Patriarch of Armenia by his friend from childhood, Leontius, by then Bishop of Caesarea.

GREGORY THE ILLUMINATOR

Micah 5.2–5 from you Bethlehem in Ephrathah
Acts 19.8–20 Paul at Ephesus teaching, contra magic

St Gregory is described by the Orthodox Church in glowing terms: 'Holy Hieromartyr Gregory, Bishop of Greater Armenia, Equal of the Apostles and Enlightener of Armenia.' When I first heard his name, I naively assumed that he was an iconographer, but reading the Orthodox description, I realised that 'Illuminator' is meant in the sense of 'enlightener', like the other major Armenian figures whose statues are placed on the facade of the Matenadaran Institute.

'Enlightener of Armenia' – in three words St Gregory's significance is summarised. To be enlightened is one of the goals of human life, and the movement from darkness to light is one of the key themes of St John's gospel. St John describes Jesus as the Light of the World, the light that the darkness could not overcome. Light is one of the essentials for life and growth. Without light the natural world withers and dies, and it is the same for us: without light we wither away. We need light to guide us, to know where we are, and to make judgements, and this is as true of our inner lives as it is of our physical lives. Without insight, without inner light, we are diminished as people.

For a Christian, true enlightenment is to live by the light of Christ. Truly seeking to do this is basic to Christianity being an identity and not just a badge. Living by the light of Christ is a very different understanding of enlightenment to secular ideas. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century put its faith in reason, rather than revelation, as the source of knowledge and morality, searching for the universal laws of a 'pure' human nature, a kind of 'universal self'. Initially, the movement was not hostile to religious faith, but in time, enlightenment came to imply the

rejection of religion, and today to be enlightened is to profess the so-called progressive, liberal, secular values of an educated elite, and to reject any claim of religion to be a purveyor of truth. Against this, Christians argue that it is simply not possible to talk adequately about the nature and destiny of human society if the spiritual dimension of humanity is ignored. True enlightenment is to see from within, to be stripped of illusion, to perceive things as they truly are, in other words, to see as God sees. This, we say, is what it means to have the light of life.

There is nothing new about the conflict between different ideas about enlightenment, as is evident from St Paul's experience in Ephesus, when he found himself excluded from the synagogue and moved his teaching to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. Like Paul, Gregory must have been a charismatic person, one through whom the light of Christ shone, and in whom people could see the difference that true enlightenment made. The way he forgave the king, his persecutor, and healed him, is a sign of Christlikeness. Again, like St Paul, I imagine that he too must have felt the same sense of inadequacy in the face of the task laid upon him. St Paul spoke of being no more than an earthen vessel to contain the divine treasure entrusted to him. How could he do so? Only by God's grace.

Gregory, like Paul, was touched by the grace of God and used by God to bring enlightenment to his people. Gregory was effective for the same reason as Paul: for both their message could not be separated from the person who proclaimed it. As with Jesus, the messenger embodied the message. In them we see a genuine Christian identity. It is people like Gregory that we need to take as a role-model for our Christian life.

September 26 – Tatev

HOPE

Micah 6.6–8 The Lord has told you what is good
Acts 20.1–12 Paul Eutychus

What did Paul speak about that Saturday night at Troas – and at some length? In one of his letters to the Corinthians he describes the age in which he lived as one without God and without hope, and I would guess that, in many and various ways he spoke about the hope that he had found in Christ, and the new life that that made possible.

Israel had lived for most of its life under foreign domination. Hope was a lifeline for Israel, as it is for all oppressed peoples. Hope sustained this land too. Under Soviet rule all churches in Armenia, apart from Echmiadzin, were closed by 1935 and the Catholicos was murdered in 1938. In this situation hope is one of the things that keeps you going, one of the things that enables injustice, adversity and suffering to be borne. Hope, said St Paul, is one of the basic Christian virtues *(1 Cor 13)*, and it is one of the enduring marks of a Christian identity.

But what do we mean by hope? We use the word hope in several senses: at its most superficial, hope is wishing that things will turn out all right, like hoping for a fine day. At another level, hope is the expectation of something desired, and at a deeper level still hope is a motivating force that underlies human striving. The poet John Maesfield spoke of this third sense when he said that 'hope is a thing given, so that a more lovely thing can be.' Hope in this deeper sense has a dynamic quality; it is a source of motivation and creativity; and it is hope in this sense that St Paul links with faith and love as one of the things that last for ever. The outworking of hope is beautifully caught by the Prophet Micah: those who hope act justly, love loyalty and walk humbly with God *(Micah 6.8)*.

Thus to hope in Christ is more than being optimistic. Optimism looks only on the bright side, entertaining only the possibility of success and refusing to entertain the possibility of failure. Optimism is disinclined to take the world as it is; hope, by contrast, does just that. It accepts that things frequently do not work out for the best; it accepts the failures and defeats familiar in human life, and yet affirms that there are possibilities of good that are worth striving for. It is hope that keeps the peace process going in Northern Ireland despite all the setbacks and disappointments. It is hope that sustains those who work for effective measures to combat climate change despite the forces ranged against them. It is hope that inspires those who work to find a cure for cancer and other major diseases, and it is hope that keeps love alive in the face of betrayal.

I think it is this kind of hope that we see in this land, one of the things that lay behind the recent 'velvet revolution'. In a sceptical world, hope sustains those who live by faith; it keeps us going when optimism fails. John Macquarrie draws out the contrast between hope and optimism: 'Optimism, he says, 'is a philosophy that misses the ambiguity of the world and fails to consider seriously its evil and negative features. …it is frequently brash, arrogant, complacent and insensitive.' But hope is vulnerable, tentative, sensitive and compassionate. In contrast to the optimisms of the world, 'true hope lives in the awareness of the world's evils, sufferings and lacks. Hope must remain vulnerable to evidences that count against it, humble in face of the evils that have to be transformed, and above all compassionate toward those whose experience has been such that their hopes have grown dim or have even been dissolved in despair.' (*Christian Hope*, *p.13.)* Hope both provides the vision of a better, fairer world, and enables us to work for its realisation.

September 27 – Karahunj / Jermuk

Speaking Stones

Genesis 1–6, 14–19

Many of these stones have a hole bored through them and they emit a whistling sound on windy days. This has given rise to the name of this place, Karahunj, which means *Speaking Stones*. But of what do they speak?

In 2004 Karahunj was officially designated as a pre-historic observatory, but expert opinion remains divided. The site has many burial cists, and some believe that it is a necropolis. Whatever the truth, it seems clear that the stones had a ritual function, for example, determining the right time for religious events according to the alignment of planets or stars. These stones speak of the quest to find meaning in the heavens so that events on earth are aligned with events in heaven. They speak to me of the human need to locate ourselves within a greater reality.

Seeking meaning in the movement of the heavenly bodies is an ancient occupation. St Matthew tells us that the Magi who brought gifts to the infant Jesus were astrologers. Like those who built this place, the Magi looked to the heavens for signs and portents of events on earth. In the same way today, in some cultures, astrology is used to determine the most auspicious time for weddings and other ceremonies, and even in the sceptical West the popularity of horoscopes points to the persistence of the belief that there is a connection between the cosmos and the earth, between the whole and the parts – and you don't have to be superstitious to feel that there is something in this.

Today the cosmos, and the movement of the heavenly bodies, are better understood than when these stones were set in place, and our knowledge confirms the ancient sense that we are part of a mysterious whole, and that our survival depends on understanding the connection. Joining heaven to

earth is what we pray for each time we say the Lord's Prayer, and in the Eucharist we believe that our worship is joined with that of the saints and all the heavenly host. Jesus, we believe is the human face of God, the greater reality within which we seek to locate ourselves, the origin and destiny of all that is. In him the mystery that those who placed these stones sought comes close to us and enfolds us in love.

JUSTICE

Micah 6.9–end Condemnation of false measures, etc.
Acts 20.13–24 Paul at Miletus: he has kept the faith, he goes to Rome

One of the basic hopes that Christianity holds out to oppressed peoples is justice. The hope for justice is not simply about fair dealing in the courts, but about social justice, fair dealing between different people and groups.

Providing justice is one of the functions of law, and there are lots of rules in the OT about fair dealing, especially between rich and poor. The infringement these rules was denounced by the prophets; for example Micah's condemnation of false measures, describing the rich as 'steeped in violence.' *(Micah 6.10–12)* But more than this, the law given to Moses was designed to shape the nature of Israelite society so that everyone was able to feel a sense of participation and that their basic needs would be met. While there was no doctrine of social and economic equality, there was a strict duty placed on the rich to help the poor. This duty went beyond charitable donations to a real sharing of goods and good fortune. The idea that they were all in it together was a reality and not just a political slogan. So, for example, no one could be permanently enslaved; slaves had to be freed after six years, and the slave-owner had to provide capital resources for a new start in life, as the law made plain:

> Do not let him go empty-handed. Give to him lavishly from your flock, from your threshing floor and your winepress. Be generous to him, as the Lord your God has blessed you. *(Deut 15.14, 18)*

Moreover, the former owner is warned against being resentful, for the slave has been worth twice the wage of a hired man. How different the history of slavery would have been had these principles been observed. And how different the modern business world would be if their spirit was carried over into commercial life. Bishop Simon Phipps was asked once what love meant in business life; he replied 'Taking everybody's interests seriously.' Among other things, that means reducing the gross economic inequality between rich and poor that scars our society, and this includes fair trade between the rich and the poor nations, like Armenia.

But having the right rules is not enough; justice is a thing of the spirit as well as the law, hence the concern to teach the right the attitude that the slave-owner should have towards his slaves. The source of this right attitude is virtue. Virtue is a thing of the spirit, an inner strength or disposition of the will that shapes our whole approach to life. Too often we are more aware of its absence than its presence, as with the oft-repeated claim, when some dubious dealing has been exposed, 'I've done nothing wrong!' This may be true according to the letter of the law, but not according to its spirit. It shows a lack of virtue. The French jurist Montesquieu said, 'When virtue is banished, ambition invades the minds of those who are disposed to receive it, and avarice invades the whole community.' This is precisely what happened in the banking crisis, and in too many scandals since.

The divine concern for social justice presents a sharp challenge to many conventional attitudes, for example, 'I've earned it; it mine to do what I like with.' It also presents a challenge to a global economic system based on the

maximisation of advantage. It may suit the rich, but it further impoverishes the poor. And in this relatively poor country, that is food for thought. We, and many a slave-owner and business-man, may believe that like St Paul we have kept the faith; the question is, how much of it have we kept?

September 28 – Selim Pass / Sevanavank

Caravanserai

John 14.1–6 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places

This road over the Selim Pass was one of the routes of the Silk Road, and it brings to mind merchants with long trains of pack animals, loaded with goods, slowly making the steep ascent. They would break their journey here, enjoying the shelter and hospitality of this caravanserai. When Jesus spoke about the life to come this was the image he used. The Greek word usually translated as 'rooms' or 'dwelling places' also has the sense of a resting place on a journey, like a caravanserai. If this is what Jesus meant (and it is only fair to say that scholarly opinion is divided), then it suggests that heaven is not a static state, but a dynamic state where we pursue a path towards God. Like a caravanserai it is both a place of arrival and of departure. Jesus says he is going to prepare a place for us, and our destiny is to be with him in that place, but the idea of that place being the equivalent of journey's end, a place of permanent rest without further spiritual progress, does not seem consistent with his other images of God which are dynamic and motivating. To be with Jesus is never to stand still; it is to be on a journey, and it makes sense to me that in the life to come that journey continues.

FREEDOM

Micah 7.1–8 Wickedness in the land, but the prophet hopes
Acts 21.1–14 Paul travels to Israel despite warnings

If justice is the one of the basic hopes held out by Christianity to oppressed people, another is freedom. The story of Israel begins with a divine act of liberation: God frees his people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. The story has inspired many oppressed peoples, among them the American slaves, and I imagine it has also spoken to the Armenians in their recent history.

Isaiah paints a wonderful picture of freedom in which he describes a world in which the wolf will live with the lamb and the calf will feed with the lion. The hope that this prophecy expresses is of a world that is free, not only from external forces of injustice, fear, oppression and violence, but also from those internal forces that diminish and enslave humanity. The hope is for a world in which all people and all creation can freely enjoy the peace of God. Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, paints a different picture, a picture of a society in which no honest person can be found, with people bent on devising wrong – the grasping ruler, the corrupt judge, the powerful man concerned only for himself. Micah describes a society that is corrupt within, that has lost contact with the divine vision described by Isaiah, a society that, among other things, has the wrong ideas about freedom.

Freedom in the Bible is not simply a formal freedom, like freeing a slave legally, but a substantive freedom that requires concrete and generous, even lavish, measures that will return to the slave his or her full humanity. The hope of freedom is, at root, for the restoration of full humanity and autonomy to all who are oppressed.

There is a completeness about this hope which looks for wholeness at three levels: for the individual, for society, and for the world. The sense of wholeness that it imports includes physical safety, well-being and health; and also prosperity, joy and harmony. The hope of the Israelites escaping from Egypt may have been simply for freedom *from* oppression, but in the eyes of God it was also freedom *for* worship. God told Moses to go to Pharoah and say, 'These are the words of the Lord: Let my people go in order to worship me.' *(Exodus 8.1)* In the Bible freedom is never simply *freedom from*, that is, an escape from bondage, it always includes *freedom for*, that is, to enjoy, and contribute to, the well-being of society.

There is, inevitably, a political dimension to this. A society that seeks wholeness is one that protects people from from poverty, starvation, treatable disease and oppression, as well as from force and coercion. I do not think it is possible to achieve this without a religious vision. Under Soviet control the Armenians were protected from poverty, starvation and disease but at the cost of the severe curtailment of personal liberty. In the West, we live free from oppression, but in an increasingly unequal society that further impoverishes the poor and vulnerable. The Jewish vision of society, based on the idea of the-person-in-community, which has passed into Christianity, and which Islam also reflects, corrects these imbalances, enabling the individual and communal dimensions of life to be held together without the one dominating the other. Both the recent history of this country, and our own experience, show what happens when this balance is lost, and bear out the importance of the biblical understanding that freedom has a purpose beyond individual liberty. God made us to be free in the way that he is free: freedom is the gift that enables us to love, delight in and care for one another and for all creation.

September 29 – Hagharstin / Goshavank

Heaven

Gen 28.10–17 Jacob's dream of the ladder
John 1.47–51 Jesus and Nathaniel: You shall see angels

I've spoken briefly about enlightenment, hope, justice and freedom. They belong together, and each has a distinctively Christian understanding which I've tried to outline. Making this real in our lives is one of the things that prevents religion from being simply a badge and a way of stating our difference from others, and makes it a source of virtue that shapes our lives and helps us to reach out and build bridges with those who are different.

At Karahunj we saw what is believed to be an ancient observatory, a place to study the heavens. We speak of heaven as the abode of God. Many of our ideas of heaven are drawn from the Book of Revelation, with its glorious pictures of God enthroned, surrounded by saints and angels, and all the heavenly host singing the triumphal song:

> Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God almighty
> who was, and is, and is to come.

Its the song we sing every time we celebrate the Eucharist. Just as Jacob had a vision of heaven, with the angels ascending and descending the great ladder linking heaven and earth, so in worship as our prayers and praises ascend to God, so his mercy and love come down to us.

Heaven, of course, is not a place; it is a state of being, the sense of being close to God. I think this is the hope that Jesus held out to Nathaniel when he said that he would see what Jacob had seen, heaven wide open and God's angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Heaven is where hope is fulfilled, and justice and freedom are enthroned. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask that heaven should be realised on earth: 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.' Its what we

pray and hope for, and God calls us to work with him to make our hope real. Each step we take to deepen our faith, and to make our Christian identity more than a badge, we hasten the coming of the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

September 30 – Dilijan *Feast Day of St Gregory the Illuminator*

WITNESS

1 Peter 5.1–4 Tend the flock of God, setting them an example
John 10.11–16 The Good Shepherd

Today is the feast day of St Gregory the Illuminator. It feels quite serendipitous that we bring our pilgrimage to its conclusion on this day when Armenia celebrates its patron saint and illuminator.

Not a lot is known about Gregory, he is, to use St Paul's phrase, one of the unknown men whom all men know, and in this he has much in common with most of the saints. He certainly wasn't perfect – it doesn't seem very saintly to leave your wife in order to enter a monastery – but, in contrast to popular ideas, moral perfection is not the criterion for sainthood. As someone remarked, if that were the rule few, if any, would have made the grade. Being a saint is much more about being an effective witness for Christ. When it comes to faith, there are no proofs, only witnesses, as Martin Buber said. Saints like Gregory are those whom God has set apart to bear witness to the resurrection. This is, of course, the calling of all Christians. We are a people set apart to bear witness to Christ; the saints are, if you like, shining examples of this calling, those who encourage and strengthen us for our common task.

It is easy to get the wrong idea of what it means to be set apart. Jesus spoke of those whom he called as not belonging to the world, but sent into

the world just as he was sent into the world, and he prayed that they would be sanctified in the truth *(John 17.16–18)*. Those whom Jesus sends are not set apart in the sense of being an exclusive group, but in the sense of having a distinct mission, and with a clear allegiance to God and not to the world. They are to be a sign that humankind has its origin and destiny in God, they are to proclaim his love, his laws and his justice, and live by his truth. It is the truth that God gives – the knowledge of his nature, the insight into his purposes, the ability to see things from his standpoint – which sets the people apart. We are set apart was so that we can be effective witnesses, not as an exclusive group; we are given a task not a status.

Part of that task for a bishop like Gregory is to tend the flock, as St Peter urged his fellow elders to do. As he said, its not just a matter of attending to their needs, but of setting an example. Contemporary saints like Maximilian Kolbe, Mother Teresa, Janani Luwum, and Oscar Romero, show what that example includes. They bore witness against racism, poverty, oppression and violence in the name of Christ. They were eloquent signs of the Christian hope for justice, freedom and peace. Three of them bore witness in their death. Like the Good Shepherd, they laid down their lives for their sheep. Gregory was not called to do that, but he did suffer for his faith. Hs calling was to be set apart by God to be a witness to this land,. We have seen his legacy in the many places we have visited; through those whom we have met we have seen how his example has formed this people, and for that we give thanks.
