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VOICES FROM THE EDGE: THE JUDGEMENT OF THE WORLD

Keynote address by Kathryn Galloway, the Iona Community

This is what Yahweh asks of you, only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.

A few years ago, Scotland's leading classical composer, James McMillan, caused an almighty uproar when, in a lecture given at the Edinburgh Festival, he accused Scotland of being a land of 'sleepwalking bigotry', where 'visceral anti-Catholicism' disfigures national life; he described his perception of a cultural context of veiled prejudice, subtle discrimination and at times, outright bigotry. In particular, speaking as an artist, he described the Reformation as a cultural revolution beginning in 1560 which involved a violent repudiation of art and music from which, he argued, Scotland has never fully recovered; and in a highly contentious parallel, he compared John Knox with Mao-tse-Tung and Andrew Melville with Pol Pot.

All hell broke loose. If the accuracy of someone's opinions can be gauged by the response they generate, then McMillan was indeed spot-on, if not in all his facts then certainly in the fact that sectarianism is still a live issue in Scotland.

So much so, indeed, that within a matter of months, a major study of sectarianism in Scotland was rolling off the presses, written from the varying perspectives of history, politics, education, the media, the churches and the

arts. As someone with a considerable interest in the issue, eagerly I bought my copy.

In ‘Scotland’s Shame?’, I found much to stimulate me, to both agree and disagree with. But one response to the book overrode all the others. It was that I was reading a book written by 23 men and one woman!

Women make up just over half of the population of Scotland. In every Christian denomination in Scotland, they constitute a much larger majority. Two of the contributors to the book suggested that sectarianism is gendered, essentially a masculine preoccupation. Stirring stuff -but it merited only a few paragraphs. Other than that, silence!

It is not my intention here to develop any theory of the gendered construction of sectarianism – I tell this story to illustrate that we read texts in different ways and with different emphases according to where we read **from -**as was also demonstrated by the man who wrote somewhat plaintively, ‘if James McMillan thinks it’s hard being a Catholic in Scotland, he should try being gay in the Catholic church.’

Judgement of Micah: the community of faith

The reality of judgement is a note that resonates through the book of Micah. One of the things that gives the great prophetic voices of the Old Testament such power is that they speak from and to all sections of society, in the royal court and among the settled and prosperous, among the priestly castes and the urban sophisticates. But Micah, perhaps more than any of the others, speaks with the voice of the poor. This peasant farmer with the suspicion of the countryman for a so-called progress which will leave the poor even poorer calls the people of Israel to account for their crimes; and he is quite clear about what these are:

- **The oppression of the weak by the strong**
- **The expropriation of peasants from their land**
- **The eviction of smallholders**

- **The enslavement of children**

Now we know very well that nearly three thousand years later, none of these crimes has disappeared from the face of the earth, and we rightly stand in judgement against them, condemn them, may be actively involved in campaigning against them. By the authority of scripture, with the authorisation of church and tradition, we read the prophetic texts against a world which practises such things, and the world is found wanting.

But at this point, it may be important to remember that Micah's words were actually addressed quite specifically to the community of faith, to the people of the covenant. The Hebrew prophets did not appear out of nowhere, their critique was not an external one; they stood within a prophetic tradition and it was because of their belonging within the community that they understood so well the nature of the faith of Israel. They were not making high-sounding abstract generalisations of the 'justice and peace is a great idea and wouldn't it be great if more people did it' kind. Their call was historical, contextual, directed against specific concrete social and economic practices in a particular place at a particular time. That is to say, it was political. In the words of George MacLeod, they were not prepared to tolerate 'the obscenity of the now.'

But although their interventions were political in nature, and had direct (and often for them unpleasant) political consequences, their motivation was rooted in a passionate belief that the covenant relationship of God with the people of Israel demanded that the relationships of the people with each other should reflect and replicate that covenant. To use a rather crude spatial analogy, the covenant was horizontal as well as vertical. And therefore the priests of the covenant were particularly culpable for suggesting that pious practices, religious rituals and sacrifices, visiting holy places or indeed any kind of formalism that left social morality unaffected could avert the awful reality of God's judgement. It was a dangerous illusion to suggest that no harm could befall a people chosen to receive the covenant. It was precisely because they were people who had been liberated by the Exodus, had received both the

Law and the promise, that they were particularly under judgement. Of all people, they were the ones who should turn from oppressing and enslaving others. Through the voice of Micah, the religiously pious, those who were attached to their own pure identity as the chosen people, were being judged by the poor of the particular world of that little part of the Ancient Near East.

And as followers of Jesus, sharers in the new covenant, we too have to take a relationship to the judgement of the world. By the authority of scripture, church and tradition, we stand in judgement on the world and find it wanting. But that judgement is a two-edged sword. For in confronting the world with our texts and dogmas, we are in turn confronted by the world, which shows us to ourselves as church. A couple of years ago, someone I know, innocently going about his business, was stoned and injured by a group of young men who had just been taking part in an Orange Walk in the East End of Glasgow. I can say that such people in Scotland never darken the door of a church, and it would be true. I can say that the Church of Scotland would condemn such attacks unreservedly and there's hardly a parish church in Scotland which would entertain the Orange Lodge anywhere near it and it would be true. But it would be an evasive answer, equivalent to Micah's priests. A church like mine which could in its General Assemblies in the 1920s and 30s express what now appear as deeply racist anti-Irish, anti-Catholic sentiments, and could recommend repatriation as a means of preserving Scotland's pure Presbyterian identity, is finding its judgements read back to it. 'Judge not, that you be not judged', indeed.

Seeing the face of God

The story of Jacob and his brother Esau bestrides the Hebrew scriptures like a colossus. Even today, its psychic power casts a long shadow over human history. You remember these children of Isaac and Rebecca, struggling together in the womb before they were born, Esau coming out with Jacob clutching tightly to his heel. But only one, according to the law, the elder by a breath, could inherit, and he would inherit everything. By this system, dividing property to provide equal distribution was unimaginable. It was the system by which Isaac himself had profited. His father, Abraham, had sent away all his other children so that Isaac would not be deprived of his security.

But then two things happened. First, Jacob took advantage of Esau's hunger to persuade him to trade his rights as first-born in exchange for some food. And then, years later, Jacob, with his mother's encouragement and connivance, tricked the aged and blind Isaac into believing that he was Esau, and giving him his final dying blessing.

Now Esau hated Jacob, and planned to kill him once their father had died. So Rebecca sent Jacob away, beyond Esau's reach, for, she said, 'why should I lose both my sons on the same day.' Esau stayed at home, let his anger cool, and to please his father, the man who could not give him his blessing, took a Hebrew wife.

Genesis 33 describes the meeting of Jacob and Esau after all these years. Messengers had already told Jacob that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men, and Jacob is worried and frightened. He sends servants ahead of him with gifts, which they are to present to Esau humbly, with the words,

'These are from your servant Jacob. He sends them as a present to his master Esau.' *Jacob thinks,* **'I will win him over with the gifts, and perhaps when I meet him, he will forgive me.'**

And so Jacob goes out with all his family to meet Esau. We read:

Jacob went ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, threw his arms around him and kissed him. They were both crying.

Esau asks Jacob about the gifts. *Jacob answers*, **'It was to gain your favour.'** *But Esau said:* '**I have enough, my brother; keep what you have.'**

Jacob replied: **'No, please, if I have gained your favour, accept my gift. To see your face is for me like seeing the face of God, you have received me with such kindness.**

Our scriptures, our faith, our Lord, all teach us that blessing is first and foremost communal blessing, a birthright for all of abundance, of enough when what is provided is shared. In the story of Jacob and Esau, we are presented with blessing misappropriated and abused, taken from being a communal inheritance to be a prize in a game for winners and losers; the prize being the right to function in the image of the god of monopoly who alone held all power in his hands. And when blessing is reduced to being a prize in a game, it becomes extremely difficult for those who wish to claim their share of the inheritance to do so outwith the rules of the game. In their different ways, Isaac, Rebecca and Jacob all were limited in their response to this palpable injustice, this departure from right relationship.

According to the rules of the game, not only could Isaac not give an additional blessing to Esau, he was actually required to condemn him for being a loser, and then he was obliged to curse the loser. In this game, you are not debarred for cheating – cheating becomes a tactic for winning. There is no way to restore justice to the one wronged. And in order to live with oneself, it then becomes necessary to find a way of making the loser to blame for losing.

First they said we were savages. But we knew how well we had treated them, and knew we were not savages.

Then, they said we were immoral. But we knew minimal clothing did not equal immoral.

Next, they said our race was inferior. But we knew our mothers, and knew that our race was not inferior.

After that, they said we were a backward people. But we knew our fathers, and knew we were not backward.

So then they said we were obstructing progress. But we knew the rhythm of our days, and knew we were not obstructing progress.

Eventually, they said the truth is that you eat too much and your villages take up too much of the land. But we knew that we and our children were starving, and our villages were burned to the ground. So we knew we were not eating too much, or taking up too much of the land.

Finally, they had to agree with us. They said; you are right. It is not your savagery or immorality or your racial inferiority or your people's backwardness or your obstructing of progress or your appetite or your infestation of the land that is at fault. No. What is at fault is your existence itself. (Alice Walker)

The loser must deserve to lose. Otherwise we must question the game itself – and who wants to do that when you're the winner?

And Rebecca? Well, in this game, she wasn't even allowed to be a participant on her own behalf. She could only exercise power through her son. And, throwing all her frustrated ingenuity in on Jacob's side, they won. But the cost of victory for Rebecca was that she betrayed her elder son, endured 20 years of separation from the younger one, and died unattended by him, on whom she had bet all of herself. He was away playing the next round. In the patriarchal game, her choice lay between being a loser or a collaborator.

And what about the winner? Twenty years on, he is inhibited, guilt-ridden, ever more cautious, anxious and fearful of Esau, always planning and plotting, the consequences, one feels, of stealing a birthright. And when they meet, it is Esau, the one who has been cheated out of his inheritance, who is generous-hearted and forgiving, spontaneous in expressing his feelings and faithful to his human needs. Where Isaac had felt himself bound by the rules of the game, Esau believed otherwise. By ignoring its rules and acting according to more open and merciful values, he, of all of them, was able to transcend the game, by remaining absolutely rooted, engaged in the daily concerns of his land and family, by refusing to accept the split between a high and holy god who was powerless to extend blessing, and the wronged and dispossessed who sought it. Esau continued to act in solidarity with the God who intends life abundant for everyone. He disregarded that god in the sky far away from

people. That god in the sky has been held up ever since as a threat to people who refuse to accept their allotted role as losers in the monopoly game.

This is a story which goes right to the heart of Micah's call, for in these tortured familial relationships, we can see the tortured familial relationships of our time, our communities, our world; here is the human family. It is a story about what it means to live in righteousness, right relationships, about acting justly, loving tenderly and walking humbly with God. It is a timely reminder that, whatever our present-day obsessions with what the Bible may or may not say about various sexualities, its core concerns in human relationships remain those between parents and children and above all, between siblings. And this story is for me a most profound meditation on our present catastrophic world order, and the game of winners and losers it represents.

About ten years ago, I was involved in some work on cultural and spiritual values in development. This work had its origins in the concerns of a small agency, seeking to raise awareness in Scotland about global issues of poverty, which was struggling with two particular difficulties. One was the tendency for many in the West to see poverty in the countries of the South as being the result of Southern fecklessness, ignorance, overpopulation, war...in effect, as 'their fault', and to feel that 'charity begins at home', without taking on board the complex causes of poverty, and the role of the West through colonialism and exploitation in helping to impoverish the so-called 'third world'.

The second difficulty lay in addressing the recognised and well-documented failures of the predominant development models since the Second World War. Because so many development initiatives and projects were too exclusively based on Western ideas of progress, economics, social life and values, technology and so on, many of them actually damaged the communities they sought to support, uprooted and weakened them, and alienated them from their own cultural and spiritual roots and resources.

Added to this was many people's sense of powerlessness at being the object of external (and often alien) notions of progress, rather than being able to be the subjects of their own self-development. They were being excluded, not

just from setting the goals of their development, but from shaping its means. This sense of powerlessness is also found in the West, especially among those whom society often designates as 'losers' or 'the underclass'.

In the ten years since then, none of this has got any better. The globalisation of markets has proved an unstoppable colossus, kicking its way through well-intentioned but ineffectual legislation designed to protect the environment, workforces, local communities, and American citizens have been as unable to resist the rolling back of such legislation as Indian, Brazilian or Malaysian citizens. Such powerlessness is not confined to people living in poverty; it affects our own legislators equally.

In the economic landscape of the west, there are a number of ways of being a stakeholder, which, of course, offer a different size of stake, and of power. You can be someone with **capital**, that is, individual accumulated wealth owned by you at a given moment, as distinct from earned income such as a salary or wage. Your capital might be land, property, money, stocks and shares, gold, works of art; if you have a house, it will be the equity. The economic value of any of these assets is not fixed, and you do not determine their value. Their value is determined by market forces.

Markets determine value by a number of criteria – we all know now from watching reality TV that the criteria for the value of a house, for example, include such things as its spaciousness, its condition, its convenience, its utility, its stylishness, its originality, its location, its scarcity (if yours is one of a kind, you're probably on to a winner). Broadly speaking, property values are based on beauty, craftsmanship, and the ability to maximise the space between human beings while minimising their distance from services and utilities – much the same values as pertain with cars, air travel, and indeed as private health and education. You may love your little shabby flat, it may have huge cultural and spiritual value for you, but that'll not show up in its selling price.

There are some particularly talented people whose brains or bodies are considered so desirable in market terms that in themselves they **are** their own

capital; their value is far more than they earn; a David Beckham, for example, or a Jo Rowling. But that value only applies as long as they are in possession of the qualities that make them attractive to the market – their talent, its rarity, its worth to Real Madrid or the world's reading children. **In the market, value is always extrinsic.** Nothing has value in and for itself, only for what it can be sold for.

Or you can be a stakeholder in the economic landscape through your **labour**, the work of your brain or hands, by your skill, experience or muscle. Again, your labour is only worth what the market determines. If you're a brain surgeon or a member of Westlife, you're worth quite a lot, because your skills are rare and in demand, or because a great many people, for some inexplicable reason, want to buy your records. If you're a firefighter or a nurse, you're worth a bit less, because you're not so rare – but you still have a reasonable stake. If you're a cleaner or an outworker in the clothing industry, your value is very low, because anyone can do what you're doing, so it's very easy to replace you. You're worth the minimum wage, or less. But what if you no one wants you in the labour market, because you're too old, or unskilled or inarticulate or unattractive. What if you are like the woman who said to me after dozens of unsuccessful job applications, ' It feels like there are too many people in the world, and I'm one of them.' Then your value is set at the most basic support level. And that's a bit of a problem, because then you are excluded from your only other economic stake, which is as a consumer.

In the economic landscape, there are whole communities which are almost entirely redundant to the market economy. They have little market value. Their environment does not value them to the point where their children may be suffering from malnutrition. Furthermore, these communities are most likely to be the ones which are symbolically undesirable and politically irrelevant. That is, they are a blot on the landscape, and most of them can't vote, don't vote, or their votes are taken for granted.

I said **almost** entirely redundant to the economy. But not quite. There is one group of traders to whom such communities are the most profitable of all. They are the people who sell money. Or, to give them their biblical name,

moneylenders. **Indebtedness** is both a major consequence and a major cause of poverty. Scotland, once known for its thrift, is now the most heavily indebted country in Europe. Of course, borrowing money is part and parcel of economic life across the globe; it's not new, and it's not confined to the poor. The world's biggest debtor by a long way is the United States government. Consumer credit is what's driving western economies. No, what's really interesting in looking at the economic landscape is not that people borrow money. It's that the people who have the least pay the most to do so.

Poor people have to borrow money to counteract the consequences of being redundant to the economy. There is increasing evidence that people get into unsustainable debt because they simply do not have enough money to pay for basic necessities. Furthermore, because people living in poverty are denied access to the normal and more affordable sources of credit, such as bank accounts, many are pushed towards legal and illegal moneylenders. To be economically redundant is, paradoxically, to be subject to market forces at their most primitive. In such a context, dealing drugs makes perfect economic sense.

- powerless
- isolated
- degraded
- angry –it's totally fixable
- you're a scapegoat when there's no war or external enemy
- scrutinised and judged
- looked down on
- dehumanized
- hopeless and helpless
- not just about money
- officials take over your life
- not needed
- strain on family life

These are words used by people living in poverty to describe their experience. But they are actually words about spirituality, about the effect of poverty on the human spirit.

'People don't choose to be poor or to live in poverty. In most cases it is through a series of circumstances; illness, death, unemployment or disability. So people should not feel stigmatised – yet they very often are.' These words are a profound statement about value. People's sense of their own worth is today inextricably linked with the economic. We have, all of us to some degree, internalised our extrinsic market valuation.

Many of the ways in which people have previously understood their lives to be meaningful and of worth, in their relationship to land, work, community or clan, religion or ideology – have been subjected to a breaking process which has shaken people loose from them as a source of meaning, and hence of belonging, identity and well being. In that loss, we look to other things to fill the gap.

The nuclear family has had a burden of expectation thrown on to it of meeting all the needs and aspirations of its members that has simply proved too great to carry. It is cracking under the strain.

The nation state, a political construct that has had varying degrees of success, is always at risk of being understood as a destructive cultural or ethnic nationalism.

The superstate, as the European Community may be described, is too impersonal and remote to meet the hunger to have our worth affirmed.

And above all, the marketplace constantly entices us, to find meaning, belonging, identity, in the gratification of our desires through the economic. Whether our hungers are really met in the array which we are invited to consume is debatable. What is sure that the cost of economic growth is huge, and is unequally borne by the poorest and most vulnerable. The damage to the earth's ecology is already well known, and in the long term renders

everyone deeply insecure. No longer is it possible to act as if what we do with our money has got nothing to do with right relationship – it has everything to do with it, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

In trying to understand any spirituality, it is important to look at what it believes to be its **highest** value. We might be of the opinion that greed, and the unbridled pursuit of profit most characterise our economic system, but we will fail in our search for enlightenment if we do not also try to catch a glimpse of what for many is its best vision, its treasure. This I understand to be the maximisation of individual **freedom,** expressed through the increased extension of **choice.** Such freedom – to own or possess, to develop and explore and utilise, to reap the rewards of one's labour and enjoy its fruits – have, it might be argued, driven the onward progress of science, technology, the arts, civic and political life, health and education –all that seem to make life worth living.

To be free, unbounded, without limitation, has a huge emotional and spiritual attraction. Part of the nature of freedom is the readiness to take on board the risks that go along with it. Exploration of new territory involves the danger of getting lost, encountering unknown obstacles – the mythological cultures of the Promised Land, the Wild West, Space, the Final Frontier, recognise and accept this. Speaking at the Columbia memorial service, George W Bush said, *'Each of these astronauts had the daring and discipline required of their calling. Each of them knew that great endeavours are inseparable from great risk, and accepted those risks willingly in the cause of discovery.'* More prosaically, it is recognised in the markets, in the small writing that reminds us that interest rates can go down as well as up. But in the real world of economics, the nature of freedom is also, increasingly, being perverted.

In theory, we trade the security of communal provision for individual freedom and choice. In theory, we thereby exchange the constraints placed on our actions for the risks engendered by our individual freedoms. But that trade-off is actually becoming less and less real. Increasingly, the risks are paid for by the same people who still suffer the constraints. Only now, not only do they not enjoy the freedom, they don't have the security either, as has been

painfully evident in New Orleans. Because, of course, our free market really has got nothing to do with freedom.

At present, trading (the most reliable way to overcome poverty), is seriously distorted by such inequitable practices as the offloading of European and American surpluses on to African and South American markets, putting local producers out of business. Heavily subsidised western goods lower prices to such an extent that local traders simply cannot compete. Stringent regulations placed by western-controlled institutions on trade and markets in developing countries, such as no subsidies, are not observed by the very countries which impose them. It's a question of 'do what we say, not what we do'.

There's one area in which Britain really is a world leader – our (heavily subsidised) arms trade. Every year, half a million people across the world are killed by guns which can be bought in some places for the price of a chicken. It's estimated that there are some 100 million guns circulating in Africa alone.

The worst impact is borne by innocent civilians – children, women, the sick and elderly. Bullets claim more lives in Africa than such major killers as tuberculosis, malaria or road accidents. Firearms have transformed once stable and relatively prosperous communities into medieval fiefdoms. Economic and social development has been stripped away. There are huge profits in selling guns but the most vulnerable pay a high price.

Meanwhile, boardroom payoffs with golden pension deals to failed managers and directors go on unchecked, while the pensions of ordinary people disappear like snow off a dyke. The markets are not free. Labour is most certainly not free to move – to be an economic migrant is to be the lowest of the low, although they are merely following the logic of the market. Only the unchecked flow of capital is free.

The areas for the exercise of our freedom are being reduced and reduced, as everything is commodified -our time, our health, our sexuality, the air that we breathe and the water that we drink, our planet itself. A freedom that is unable to take its risks

upon itself is one that ultimately destroys itself. Freedom, we discover, is only meaningful within limits. A system that only recognises extrinsic value gradually strips us of all the things that we believe have intrinsic worth.

Speaking in South Africa, Archbishop Ndungane said, *'it is wrong and unacceptable for some people to have much, much more than they need, and others to suffer the cries of hungry children….economics should be in the service of compassion and civilised values…. there is no intrinsic value in the accumulation of money and possessions; these are positively harmful to humanity's spirit if they coexist with poverty.' …. Economics is linked to the kind of people a society produces. A compassionate economics produces compassionate people. A highly competitive economics produces insecure, frightened people hoarding their possessions, or aggressive people who win at the expense of other people.* We might say, 'people like Jacob.'

Our resistance to complicity, our refusal to play by the rules of the game of winners and losers, has to be embodied in our lives as church. In the face of a dominant economic system which sets value by market forces and whose spirituality is one of value addition, of extrinsic worth, can communities of faith affirm and practice **intrinsic worth**, in which all living things, including the earth itself, have innate value separate from and beyond their utility; in which the commodification of all of life is resisted and reversed and in which justice is done?

Jacob came bearing gifts for Esau, seeking to win back his favour and his own safe passage. But Esau did not need the kind of gifts Jacob offered. We always risk offering inappropriate and ultimately self-seeking gifts, and we cannot conduct our economic affairs as if they were spiritual exercises, offering patronage, charity or advanced spiritual awareness in return for misappropriated blessing. Seeing the face of God in those we have wronged is, I think, one of the gifts of community, for here, where we take the risk of breaking open our isolation and self-justification, take the risk of going forward to meet Esau, we discover not condemnation and rejection, but generosity, acceptance and a new relationship. And at the end of his long life, Isaac was buried by both of his sons together.