

You Are Your Brother's Keeper– The Divine Imperative

by
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First I want to express my deep gratitude for the honour I have been given to deliver the Johnson Lecture during this triennial. I believe this is the first time in the history of these Lectures for a speaker to be selected from Africa. This honour is also shared by the East Africa Yearly Meeting. We fully appreciate the historical links between Friends United Meeting and those of us from the East Africa Yearly Meeting. If in fact, it were not for that link, the excellent work that has been done jointly by pioneer missionaries (in the true sense of that word), the medical staff, the educationists, social workers, administrators (the roll of honour is long) would not have been possible. I want, therefore, to take this opportunity right from the outset of my lecture to say *Hasante Sana* (thank you very much) for all you did and are still doing for our people. We are the living witness and beneficiaries of your important work you did in East Africa.

I would like to share some experiences I have gone through which in turn focused my attention to a much wider scope of brotherhood than the usual rather restricted definition of that word.

I had been driving for quite some time from Nairobi towards Kisumu, the town on the shores of Lake Victoria. It is a long drive through what must be one of the world's most beautiful countrysides. My uneventful drive was interrupted when I hit a small bird. I stopped to find out what it was and whether it was still alive. Un-

fortunately, I had killed it, and on further examination I discovered it was a swallow, a small bird of the family of sparrows.

Shortly after, other swallows came flying past their dead companion in a most touching expression of sympathy, and I had been the one that had brought death to the poor bird, and saddened the rest of its own community. The impact of this small incident brought to my mind the oneness of all life, the precious gift of life that God has given all living things, and the fact that God cherishes it and makes its continuity possible. "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father."

God knew the small bird had fallen. He was where I was with the dead bird. I was standing on holy ground! The Creator of the entire Universe cares enough for a sparrow to know when it falls on the ground. I got into my car and continued my journey, but the journey was not the same again. Even with the comforting thought that after all, I had not killed it deliberately, and that it had hit the car and it should have been more careful, I could not remove the gloom that had settled over me. The oneness and the brotherhood of all living things—the elephant and its biological brother, the hyrax, the leopard and its sister the cheetah, the lion and its small sister the cat, the giraffe and its related antelope family, the human society and its interrelatedness to the rest of the animal kingdom—one could enumerate until one comes to the very source of All Life, the Almighty God, the Father of all living things.

This experience with the swallow forced itself on me and I felt clear in my mind I would speak to this meeting about the brotherhood of man and that of his environment, the interrelatedness of everything created by God. Our responsibility in caring for one another is

the only way that really makes sense. He who loveth God loves his brother also (I John 4:21), but this is not what man has always done through his long history on planet earth. He has continued to ignore the promptings of God's spirit to love one another; he has continued to put his greed for material wealth and for power to the throne, instead of his creator, and no wonder we are in such a mess. Our drive to satisfy an ever-increasing thirst for material things is causing problems undreamed of before. Even the most powerful country in the world is not winning the race, because her legs are caught up in the quagmire. A house built on sand cannot survive the onslaught. My grandfather was always a source of endless stories that would cheer, enlighten or frighten; important lessons were taught us through this way. One of the stories he told me that has left a very deep impression, was the story of hunters from a neighbouring tribe.

Three brothers took their spears and shield and food and left the village to go into the forest looking for elephant tusks. After a long search which lasted over three days, they found four tusks and were very happy at their good luck. They immediately sent the younger brother back home to bring food, since they had finished all they had brought with them. While the younger brother was gone, his brothers decided they would share the tusks and would kill their younger brother on his return. Nobody would ever know. Death in the forest was a common occurrence and hyenas made it quite clear there would be no traces. The younger brother was not to be underrated. He was as ambitious as his elder brothers. He decided he would not share the tusks with his brothers; after all, it was much better to have the ivory for himself. He would become the richest man in the village; he would acquire

power with additional wealth, marry many wives and have many children. He decided to poison the food. No one would know what had happened to his brothers. After all death in the forest is a very common thing and any dead bodies are quickly and efficiently disposed of by hyenas. As soon as he arrived where he had left his brothers an arrow shot through him, and since the arrowhead was poisoned his death was assured. It would be a long painful death, but there was no known cure. His brothers took the food and ate it and soon they were dead. Other hunters found the younger brother who explained what had happened before he died. My grandfather would then draw the obvious moral of the three brothers. None benefited. If they had only continued to care for one another and if they had not allowed greed for wealth to overtake them, they would not have ended in such a tragic way.

This story is many times worse than that one related in Genesis 4:9.

Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him. And the Lord said unto Cain, "where is Abel thy brother?" And he said, "I know not, am I my brother's keeper?" If Cain is not his brother's keeper who else is? If blood is not sufficient to nourish and cement brotherhood what else is? The love of God is.

The Cain strain is still very much with this generation.

In the Christian era, unfortunately, the Cain strain in many people has become bolder, more aggressive and more effective in the instruments we use to kill. Who is Cain? No, it is not you, it is not me, it is the other guy, but who? The Church in the Christian era has become unable to accept full responsibility for its shortcomings. It has compromised because it has not been radical and faithful enough to its mission on earth. The

world has had nearly two thousand years of Christianity and around the globe there are wars and rumours-of-war. In fact, it would be hard to find any period in history more disturbed and deranged than this. Conflicting nationalism, racial tensions, class hostilities, ideological warfare, iron and bamboo curtains, hundreds of thousands of homeless refugees, hundreds of thousands dead in battlefields in Vietnam, in the Ogaden Horn of Africa, in Rhodesia, in South Africa, in Ireland, in the Middle East, in Uganda—these are the characteristics of our time. Is not then all this talk about the Church witness a form of self-deception, or at best, a whistling in the dark to keep our spirits up? G.K. Chesterton gave the best possible answer when he wrote:

"The Christian ideal," it is said, "has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." (*What's Wrong with the World* Part I Ch. 5)

This is obviously a very gloomy view of the Church, but we must be ruthless in identifying the pitfalls of the Church and at the same time be objective enough to know that all is not lost. When the Church realized slavery was a terrible sin it took a stand even though it took nearly 1,800 years to realize slavery was evil. Today, it is unthinkable to us that the Church could ever have tolerated slavery. The fact that the Church ultimately got over the hurdle is a pointer towards the fact that its ultimate conquest over the world is in sight. It is the current hurdles we need to identify, and we need to organize ourselves to face them in the spirit of Christ. After all it was the Founder of the Church who said "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Sharing the World's Resources

The role the Church plays in this global fight for a

more just system of sharing what God has given us has been pathetic. I recall back home in the colonial time the white settlers had occupied some of the best land in what they called the Kenya white highlands. Their crowding on land in the so-called African reserve was appalling. It was an open injustice and we were determined to correct it in our own time in our own way. Some white missionaries were not sympathetic to our plight, and as a matter of fact, some of them quoted the Bible to support white ownership of land. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's property," they told us. The inevitable violence came and many people on both sides lost their lives during the Mau Mau period. America uses nearly one-third of the world's resources of raw material to feed the most powerful and advanced industrial structure this world has ever seen through all history, and because of a dynamic economy, America has been able to dictate at what price she would buy this raw material. The plight of the Third World goes unheeded.

During the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development conference held in Nairobi, my country's capital city, the developing countries presented a plan for a fairer price structure that would give the countries that feed the Western countries' giant factories with raw material a fairer price for their goods and a say in determining the price structure. Most of the Western countries made quite sure this proposal did not succeed. Several attempts in the south-north dialogue over the need to restructure a new economic system between the rich and poor countries of the world collapsed in Paris last year.

I know that many members of the Society of Friends and of other Christian churches have taken a stand and made their voices heard that more should be done; but what of the Society of Friends and the Church

of Christ as a whole? While they compromise and rationalize millions are starving and dying without food or shelter. This protective approach motivated by a country's interests in international trade is ultimately going to change for the better if wiser counsel prevails. Political expediency is normally short-lived if it is morally wrong and self-seeking. Nothing which is morally wrong can be politically right.

Oil politics is slowly destroying the young and delicate economies of the developing world. These countries cannot develop without oil, but this has become extremely expensive. The people reaping enormous profits from oil, both here in the United States and in OPEC countries, are oblivious to the harm they are doing to the rest of the world. They are bleeding the economies of many countries, and surely, if this trend is not checked, the world is headed for economic chaos. The Church cannot afford to be indifferent to this situation.

Racial Tension

One highly civilized and cultured country, a country where the basis of their civilization is Christianity, witnessed the arrest and subsequent murder of over six million Jews because they did not belong to the so-called super race. Hitler had gone to war against Christianity and what the Church stood for and many Christians suffered martyrdom for their faith. A more subtle kind of racism has built up over the nearly 300 years whites have been in South Africa.

While on a visit to South Africa made possible by Friends Service Council in 1974, I visited Natal Province and spent my time visiting schools, community centres and many homes of people. I also had the honour of addressing a meeting of Zulu Elders. The experience of

seeing crowding on meagre land by the blacks was appalling (nearly 18 million blacks live on 13 per cent of the total area of South Africa, while 4 million whites live on the rest). I learnt that infant mortality due to malnutrition was one of the highest in the world, and those kids who starved but survived remained mentally retarded—sub-human, but intelligent enough for tasks like cleaning up streets and working in the mines or as farm labourers. This evil is perpetuated by the white South African Government in its determination to implement the policy of *Apartheid*. The white government is determined to segregate those in various racial groups from one another, and are granting sham independence to blacks in their own tribal homelands to perpetuate the continued domination of the white minority in South Africa. All this is being done through enormous financial and military support, and with the knowledge and support of a number of Western countries.

Two years ago, of the total external investment into South Africa, sixty-seven per cent represented British and American investments. If this investment were to be withdrawn slowly, the South African economy would collapse slowly, and in the process it would precipitate the long overdue political change including the sharing of power by all people. The pressure to apply economic sanctions raised at the United Nations in the thirty-second session of the General Assembly of the United Nations was effectively contained by Western countries, who in the Portuguese Colonial Era in Mozambique and Angola had sided with Portugal against the best interests of the Africans. These countries have since become independent at an enormous price in terms of lives lost. If Western countries had taken the African struggle for independence as theirs as well, there would

not have been any need for these countries to turn to Russia and Cuba for economic and military support.

The determination of men of good will in some parts of the world to see justice done for the blacks in South Africa is heartening, and one must admit the more enthusiastic support is from the so-called communist countries. The people who share the Christian faith with South Africans in the Western countries sympathize, but do very little.

There are racial tensions growing fast in Britain, there are racial tensions here. The superiority of one colour of skin over another one is, to say the least, *blasphemous*. "Shall the things framed say of Him that framed it He had no understanding?" (Is. 29:16)

I was eating lunch at the home of Miriam, a fellow black Quaker, in Soweto sometime last year. The frustrations and the tensions among the black youths against the whites and signs of ever-present possibilities for physical confrontation were easy to detect. I spent an entire afternoon touring Soweto. Many homes, schools and stores had been burnt down during the 1976-77 Police Confrontation with the school kids. These events are worrying: man has refused to look on fellow man as a brother with one common fatherhood, and as a result of this, greed, pride and disobedience and other evil forces have been released that will ultimately destroy that country. If these remain unresolved, races will certainly destroy one another as surely as the three brothers did in the story I told before.

The world is in turmoil. The Jews and the Arabs, the sons of Abraham—descendants of Isaac and Ishmael, blood brothers—cannot live in peace in the only piece of land on this planet that has known more wars than any other. The piece of land that was honoured to raise the Prince of Peace, rejected Him and

had Him killed like a criminal.

Recently, when an Israeli leader was asked whether the government would revenge against the Palestinians who had killed thirty-five people in a bus near Tel Aviv, he said "We don't know how we can revenge the murder of a baby. Satan has not come up with a new invention." Revenge, yes, that is what the Jews and Arabs have been doing over their entire history, but the Lord of Peace said, "Turn the other cheek: do to others what you would like them to do to you." This advice goes unheeded. Are we in despair? Do we not know the way? Yes, there is still hope. The Almighty God is still in charge. There is a moving story of how the wife of that great German theologian, Martin Luther, came to eat breakfast in mourning dress. Her husband looked up, shocked, and asked. "Who has died?" She promptly replied "God." Martin Luther got the point. He had been brooding in complete despair, feeling defeated and worrying about the world. Yes, God lives, Christ lives. He's a reality in the lives of millions of people. He changed the life of an elderly lady not far from my home, in fact, a close relation. She had not been a particularly pleasant person. As illiterate as she was, it was a marvel that anybody could reach her heart. She had been persuaded to go to a Quaker Meeting for worship and there she heard the story of loving your neighbour as you love yourself. She admitted that was difficult since her own neighbour had done her great wrong. When the preacher continued to explain that in fact we should also love our enemies this old lady stood up and left the meeting in disgust. But the message had gotten home and she remained restless, turning the whole idea in her mind. She eventually submitted to the new way and she has been one of the greatest influences in my own life. She went from village to village sharing her new found faith.

In one village fierce dogs were released to chase her, but they suddenly stopped when they came to where she was. One licked her feet, the other one her hand, and the other one just stood wagging its tail as if in welcome. The owner of the dogs was so surprised that he started inquiring about what really had happened to old Ludia, and he also changed.

As an eager and yet impetuous young undergraduate, I had visited her on my motorcycle, and she asked me, "What did you see while you were passing through the forest on your way here?" I told her I had seen nothing worth noting. We had a long chat and at the end of it she prayed—a prayer so intimate I was amazed. She prayed as if she really was in the presence of the King of the Universe, and at the end she asked me next time to stop in the forest and listen. On my way home I did exactly that. I stopped. I heard the water of a small river passing through one of the thickest tropical forests, the Kakamega Forest. I heard the sound of wind blowing above the trees, the sound of birds singing joyfully. I heard the sound of water unhurriedly going down on its appointed course, not fussing when it encountered a big boulder in its path, but leaving it there and going round it and on its way joyfully. Tall trees, small trees, giant trees, straight and firm and strong, they were fulfilling their divine obligation in just being tall and straight and bearing their seeds in their due season. The impact of oneness of man and his environment overwhelmed me.

I must have been standing in that forest for over an hour completely absorbed in my surroundings, a refreshing change from the bustle of the city, and only then did I hear the echo of Ludia's words in my heart. "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they

shall run, and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint." (Is. 40:31). I rode on my motorcycle and went home with a new dimension about life, a dimension I cherish to this day—the ever-abiding presence of the Almighty God.

I gave a lift to a wise elderly Catholic nun in my new car and when we got to where she wanted me to drop her, she thanked me and said, "When you go fifty miles an hour God is with you, when you go sixty miles He is still with you, over that you are alone, my son." The world has been reckless in its speed to acquire this or that object and many times I am tempted to agree with the Catholic nun, the world is very much on its own. So much so that it has become at times a very frightening place to be. What agony, what words must have been in the heart of that sick and lonely lady, Mrs. Bloch, who was taken from the victims of the Air France plane that had been hijacked to Entebbe in Uganda, and placed in a hospital, only to be removed and murdered by Amin's soldiers. As a Jew, she must have known the famous words of Deuteronomy: "The Eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are lasting arms." Even at the worst of times we must hope; we must not despair. The divine imperative of love is not imposed on us, it is hinted at constantly in our hearts. I am challenged by the Lord's words, "I was an hungered and ye gave me meat, I was thirsty and ye gave me drink, I was a stranger and ye took me in, naked and ye clothed me, sick and ye visited me. Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of brethren ye have done it unto me." We are our brother's keeper; together we must support each other and so, go forward. The alternative has been tried for too long, and instead of going forward man has at times moved in circles, lost in the sight of our Father's house.

THE JOHNSON LECTURESHIP

This lectureship series was established by the Friends United Meeting in the name of Isaac T. and Lida K. Johnson to be given at the sessions of the Friends United Meeting. Isaac Johnson served for twenty-three years on the Board on Publications, giving generously of his time and talents as a businessman. Upon his death in 1937, Lida Johnson made a grant for a lectureship in his memory. Upon her death in 1946, the title of the grant was changed to include her name.

The minute of the Executive Committee creating the plans for the lectureship states in part:

"It is further recommended that these lectures . . . be restricted to the field of Christian scholarship and the Christian message and its application to life . . . It is the confident expectation of the Executive Committee that not only the constituency of the Five Years Meeting (now Friends United Meeting) but all of Quakerism will be enriched by the successive messages made possible by this gift."

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