

Convocation: Princeton Theological Seminary
14th September 2004 8:00 p.m., Miller Chapel
Address by President Iain R. Torrance

I would like my first act to be an acknowledgement of Tom Gillespie, my distinguished predecessor, who faithfully guided this seminary for so many years. Transitions are never easy, especially after a long tenure. I have never received anything but welcome, kindness and help from Tom and Barbara. My first act must be to thank them. I am standing in a pulpit which was given by Tom's congregation in California in thankfulness for his ministry. This is a good place in which to stand.

My second act must be to welcome all of you. Some of you have been here for years. In the case of the academic dean, for 50 years. I have been here for only four weeks, and I could not have been made more welcome. Two or three days after my arrival, I received a fruit basket from the students then on campus. I was surprised, and touched and grateful. Thank you.

I guess that a number of those present are as new as I am. This is the first time I have spoken at an American Convocation. I am learning, along with many of you. There may be some genre mistakes, but I want to say a little about how I see the world, how the world has changed, and how I believe this seminary may fit in and make a difference. That isn't an unrealistic or grandiose, self-deceiving thought. In the configuration of Christianity across the world today, taking account of how and where it is resourced intellectually, and which institutions produce future leaders, this seminary has a crucial role. That means all of us. We have a wonderful, accessible library of astonishing range and depth. We have a beautiful campus and an historic tradition of rigorous scholarship and have long welcomed an international community. These are factors which can make a difference in the world. But all of these are *material* things. I believe that the founding charisms of this school were in matters of the spirit.

So I want initially to consider a particular perspective on the world and then come back to reconsider my own hopes and beliefs for this Seminary. The perspective I want to consider and introduce some of you to, is that of Dr Jonathan Sacks, who has been the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth since 1991. I first came across the work of Jonathan Sacks in 1990, when he gave a set of Reith Lectures on the BBC entitled *The Persistence of Faith*. The Reith Lectures, along with the Gifford Lectures, which were recently delivered at the University of Edinburgh by Professor Wentzel van Huyssteen, are among the most famous lectures in the world. The Reith Lectures were endowed in the great days of radio, and their purpose was to broadcast—literally, to engage with the entire range of people who were questioning all round the world. As an orthodox Jew, Sacks in those lectures spoke about the construction and preservation of religious identity. He spoke persuasively about tribalism, education, loss and the transmission of wisdom. He recognized the divisive tendencies becoming more visible in the world, and using an analogy from language, he urged that we all become bi-lingual: first, we find identity in learning the language of the tribe, which he called 'narrow-

casting' and then we learn citizenship through acquiring the skills of public discourse, which he called 'broadcasting'. Sacks was prophetic. His concern was both to nurture identity, and encourage people to reach out. He was convinced by the benefits of a multicultural society. From a Jewish perspective, he anticipated aspects of what Stanley Hauerwas wrestled with in *The Peaceable Kingdom* and *Resident Aliens*. Those early lectures were followed in 1997 by a more developed version entitled *The Politics of Hope*. In this, Sacks took account of loss of confidence; language and violence; public space; the liberal revolution; the birth of the individual; and surviving catastrophe and the politics of responsibility. All of this, astonishingly, was four years before the world changed on 9/11. In 2002, reflecting on his earlier work, he published *The Dignity of Difference*, which provoked such controversy that a revised edition was quickly issued.

One reason for my persisting interest in Jonathan Sacks is that he didn't rapidly have to invent a new perspective in September 2001. For him, the widescale changes were already there and had long been identified. But now everyone had to pay attention. These are changes which are both global and local; changes in the way we understand ourselves and others, changes which affect our hopes, our self-giving; our spending, our style; our education. That's why I want to give a little time to Jonathan Sacks' perspective.

First, Sacks appropriates and makes use of Alasdair MacIntyre's perception in *After Virtue* that we are now living amidst the fragments of the moralities of the past. We have lost confidence in grand meta-narratives. All of developed western society is now like Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century, a world so damaged and divided that religion could no longer provide a bond of unity. As Sacks noted, this led directly to the secularization of Europe, first in science, then in the arts, then in politics. This was the time, for example, when just-war theory was moved from the realm of theology into civil law. Sacks, in contrast, maintains belief in the humanizing power of faith for today, but we'll pick that up in a few minutes.

Living in the midst of fragments is a shift in mind-set with which the western democracies are ill-equipped to deal. By and large, they have retreated from substantive ethical perspectives, and have become procedural and managerial. Interestingly, the forthcoming US election looks as if it may be different. By and large, western governments are fearful, with good reason, of intervention. Sovereignty, located in different places, for example the British disinclination to join the euro, is treated as if it were inviolable. That is coupled with a commitment to relativism. Sacks, in his book *The Politics of Hope* tells of James Wilson lecturing to students at Harvard about courage during the Holocaust years. Wilson was dismayed to find that there was no general agreement that those guilty of the Holocaust itself were guilty of a moral horror. 'It all depends on your perspective', one student said (*Politics of Hope*, p.35).

Much of the responsibility for framing the contemporary situation with all its ills is attributed to globalization which has contributed more changes more quickly than we can handle. Simultaneously, globalization has eroded and debased western culture, and fostered contempt for it in the wider world. We are distanced both from ourselves and from others. We are caught

in the slip-stream of a revolution which dwarfs the long-term effects of the invention of the printing press. Sacks reminds us that when he took office in 1993, Bill Clinton noted that there were some 50 registered websites. When he left office in 2000 there were upwards of 350 million (p.26). In the days before Google, McLuhan is supposed to have likened searching the internet to drinking from Niagara with a spoon. Sacks adds to this the decadence and emptiness of our culture, especially when exported and transmitted by TV. The emphasis on consumption is trivializing to those with ancient spiritual heritages, and deeply exclusionary to those who are left out in the race to riches (cf p.30).

Sacks is surprised by the resurgence of religion as such a major factor in today's world and is dismayed by the tone of voice with which it has entered the fray. This may be expected from a gentle academic, but when religion carries so much freight—not all of it religious by any means—as the creator of identity and cohesion, its growth is surely not unlikely at a time of such uncertainty.

Sacks' remedies for the modern malaise are interesting and long-considered. First, and this is the major contribution of his recent book, *The Dignity of Difference*, he argues for a different way of understanding that which we hold in common and that which we acknowledge as being different. More technically, and, I think, building on a phrase from Arnold Toynbee, he calls for the exorcism of Plato's ghost. Essentially, this is the notion, rooted in the philosophy of Plato, that there is a single truth. The idea posits that truth is unreachable but objective, and it follows that if I am right, then you are wrong. Part of Jonathan Sacks' response to this is a plea for space—hence his reference in *The Politics of Hope*, to Regent's Park in London. Regent's Park is 500 acres in the heart of London. It is a place where people can meet on equal terms; it is large enough to allow for play and difference. There are coffee-shops and restaurants, a zoo, an open-air theater and a magnificent rose-garden. On the basis of the vision of such space, Sacks argues for, and reconstructs the now neglected virtues of 'reverence, restraint, humility, a sense of limits, the ability to listen and respond to human distress' (*Dignity of Difference*, p.13). These are virtues the market does not provide.

I think this is an important argument. Having thought about it, in certain senses, in the area of truth claims and identity construction, it is an analogy to the much more familiar, but equally mysterious Christian affirmation of forgiveness. To overlook a wrong, or to neglect or discard it, is understandable. To forgive is extraordinary, and is to create a kind of moral space or discontinuity so as to enable a new beginning. I'll come back to this.

Jonathan Sacks has a second major perspective. We can be creative and say utterly new things from within a language, but we can never step outside language and continue to speak. This is the familiar argument that as human persons, we are all committed, in the sense that no-one can bale out of having a perspective. But it is more than that. Sacks is unwilling to take refuge in relativity, trying instead to distinguish between that which is absolute and that which is universal. Appeals to universals are of little help to us in today's world. Positively, they are too 'thin' to nurture resolve; negatively they are a kind of resuscitation of Plato's ghost. Instead, we need to

have space to grant dignity to one another's absolutes. As Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks reminds us that the God of the Hebrew Bible is not a Platonic being, loving the abstract form of humanity. God is a particularist, loving each of God's children for what they are. Taking this further, Sacks argues that the supreme religious challenge is to see God's image in one who is not in our image (p.60). This is the converse of tribalism. He reminds us that Judaism, in the call of Abraham, was born as a protest against imperialism and its latter day successors, which attempt to impress a single truth on a plural world. He dramatizes this with a story from Genesis Rabbah 8.5, which he told at the funeral of Isaiah Berlin. [Isaiah Berlin was one of the foundational thinkers of twentieth-century liberalism, and the author of the essay, 'Two concepts of liberty'.]

Sacks quotes: 'Rabbi Shimon said: When God was about to create Adam, the ministering angels split into contending groups. Some said, 'Let him be created'. Others said, 'Let him not be created'. That is why it is written, 'Mercy and truth collided, righteousness and peace clashed' [that is Psalm 85:11].

Mercy said, 'Let him be created, because he will do merciful deeds'.

Truth said, 'Let him not be created, for he will be full of falsehood'.

Righteousness said, 'Let him be created, for he will do righteous deeds'.

Peace said, 'Let him not be created, for he will never cease quarrelling'.

What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took truth and threw it to the ground.

The angels said, 'Sovereign of the universe, why do you do this to Your own seal, truth? Let truth arise from the ground.'

Thus it is written, 'Let truth spring up from the earth'. [And that is Ps 85:12]

Sacks points us to the bold rabbinic interpretation. 'God takes truth and throws it to the ground, meaning: for life to be livable, truth on earth cannot be what it is in heaven.' (p.64)

Let's step back and respond to this. From a western but other than Christian perspective, we have a complicated account of the disintegration of our contemporary world, its framework and its expectations. It is much more nuanced than my report of it here. We have seen something of Jonathan Sacks' recipes for recovery. These include making space for difference—his analogy of Regent's Park. We have seen his analogy of language: we are all insiders and are committed to speech. We saw his earlier theme of bi-linguality, which extended that. We saw his appeal to alternative rabbinic readings of text: 'Let truth spring up from the earth'.

Now, for the depth of recovery and the re-rooting which we require, I suspect that appeal to a spatial metaphor—Regent's Park—is nothing like enough. In my previous existence as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Divinity at the University of Aberdeen, recent legislation obliged us to take account of access to buildings and courses by those who were physically or mentally challenged in some way. I became very committed to this and quickly learned that physical barriers were the least of the difficulties we had created. We had to think more than spatially. We needed to ask what our degree programs were for, how they could be delivered, what student learning really is, and how it is assessed.

Again, Jonathan Sacks made a good deal of the disorienting nature of having near and far neighbors. Global trade, detached from a local workforce, makes ever more insecure the livelihood of the poor in parts of the developing world. But the effect of distance is to shield us from full responsibility for our actions. That is true. It is equally true of the effect of long-range combat waged from computer screens in an aircraft carrier. Yet, modern communications do not only distance us. With video-conferencing, genocide in Darfur can appear in our living rooms. Our discomfort is that we are both too far and too near. This is linked to questions of when and whether we should ever intervene. That is not only in the area of combat. At the initiative of David Steel, whom I think of as a friend, in 1966 the United Kingdom introduced a much more liberal reform of abortion law. Nearly forty years ago, thresholds were set at what was then understood as viability, and they were subsequently lowered. Yet, when we can measure fetal pain at whatever stage, the argument changes again. In the history of science, this is not unrelated to the argument over vivisection. I don't believe it may be dismissed as merely a failure of imagination. That implies that some people can get it right. I think it is more to do with an overload on an imagination which has no stable footholds or reference points. We get famine-fatigue or atrocity fatigue, which is to do with inability to cope rather than moral dullness. We are reminded of Shakespeare's King Lear, who, once he had blinded himself, thereby dramatically reducing the data, said: 'Now I can see'.

Analogies from space, distance and proximity are, I think not enough, and simply skirt the issue of overload when we have lost our bearings. Sacks' other argument, that Judaism teaches us to see the image of God in one who is not in our image is much more powerful. I don't think he would disagree, but as a Christian, I would add that we are also called not to be afraid. Where God is, I believe there is an absence of fear, an increase of love, and an increased dissatisfaction with the way things are.

Ultimately, and until I am convinced otherwise, I may say this too often, I used to believe that Christian ethics was fundamentally to do with geography, with map-making and boundaries and so was related to a spatial imagination. Increasingly now I believe it is to do with being transformed and that neither universalism nor prescription are its method. Let me try to illustrate this in a very different way.

The introductory publicity about me said that I liked the novels of Sir Walter Scott. I do, so here is an illustration from Walter Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, which first appeared in 1818. That was when this seminary was only six years old.

Scott's novels are closely observant of human nature, but almost all of them are politically inspired. After the two Jacobite rebellions of the eighteenth century and limited though bitter civil war, Scott was a propagandist for a single united kingdom. Along with much else, he tells the dramatized version of a true story in which a young woman bore a child, but was then accused of child-murder because the baby had been stolen. The woman was condemned to death under a draconian law which stipulated that if a woman bore a child in secret, without having

told anyone of the pregnancy, or asked for assistance, and could not subsequently produce the child, she was assumed to be guilty of murder. In the actual case and in the novel, the woman's sister was produced as a witness, and asked to testify that she had been told of the pregnancy. The high point of the novel, which is a wonderful gothic tale of highwaymen and soul-searching Presbyterians, is that the sister refused to tell a lie under oath. In both novel and history, the woman then walked to London and begged a pardon for her sister from the king, George II. At one level, the novel presents the familiar contest between truth-telling and pragmatism. The presentation of the dilemma was sharply criticized by George Bernard Shaw, the playwright, as an example of the mischief done in the world by 'religious and moral ideals' ('The Quintessence of Ibsenism', in *The Works of Bernard Shaw*, 1930, XIX, 125, quoted Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian*, The World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 1982, p.xii). However, George Bernard Shaw misunderstood it, along with much else. Walter Scott's novel is not about the familiar text-book puzzle. What it is about is whether and how a character who could apparently be so heartless and so inflexible could also have such grace as to win a pardon from an unsympathetic king. Essentially, it is a narrational account of how grace and truth, which are so often polarised, may properly be brought together. The alignment of grace and truth is what we see at the end of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, and that, itself, I take as a Hebrew hendiadys, *hesed we emet [grace and truth]*, which I believe would be close to the heart of Jonathan Sacks. To hold out for that moral space is no more naïve than is the practice of forgiveness to which we all so readily subscribe.

Let me finish. What were the wrongs to which Jonathan Sacks so much referred? Consumption; disregard; greed; relativism; mono-linguality in the sense of one-way traffic. Effectively, he is referring to a mode of living which is driven purely functionally. Here I come back to us. One of my chief hopes for this school is that it may be a place where truthfulness and grace continue to be linked, and we do not attempt to live purely functionally. I am becoming more aware of the divisions in American Christianity. We have them in Europe too. All of this address, of course, as you will now realize, has been a deliberate kind of sideways commentary on my desire to see grace and truth cooperate and flourish on this campus. Since I arrived here four weeks ago, I have received many letters. Perhaps the most striking came from the Myanmar Institute of Theology. The Principal wrote that Burma under socialism was isolated for many years. She was among the first to be allowed to go abroad. She said: 'PTS gave me that chance, and since then has accepted and equipped 10 faculty members'. She listed the Institute's new programs, ending: 'These programs and activities are all possible because PTS cared enough about a small seminary in a Third World country'. That, I think, is close to the founding charism of this school.