

Eclipse in Mexico

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?¹

Thus with tender heart and awful portent yet another obscure Iron Age tribesman shouts his counsel down the centuries to a bewildered posterity.

My happiest hours were spent walking with my Heavenly Father. Not since my most childish years when I toddled in delighted trust beside my earthly daddy have I felt the perfusing balm of undemanding and unconditional love beside the all wise and unknowable, and felt the guiding hand of unjustified concern. This I know for I have felt.

How well I know mercy for I have often been its heir as friends have rescued me and enemies redeemed me from my own follies at the risk of their livelihoods. Or watched hands of piety or skill remit my pain and that of others in a thousand clement acts of will. This I know for I have seen.

But what is just? I take the words of Micah very seriously. Not because I view his fulfilled prophesies as some vulgar guarantee of the rest of his authority, but because I wonder what he really asks and whether he *entirely* understood the Will of God. Justice perplexes me: I have never seen justice applied, have never received justice, nor dispensed it, nor even seen it given to others. Even the jurists, who have spent lifetimes on its evolution, have not defined it. They seem, as Shakespeare did of mercy, to assume it God-given, a simple and inscrutable axiom which sort of rains down from clear sky to the forges of the forum.

Is justice a kind of vanity, a satanic chimera sent with honor to cultivate the *superbia* of he who called himself Homo *Sapiens*? For sure, we know Vengeance, for who has not said "it serves him right" when his enemy has suffered as he wished to see? And we know Equity for we said "that seems fair" when our friend received a generous legacy from the uncle she nursed in his final years. And most of all we know Policy, for we know that crime must be punished to encourage the others and control those who may disrupt.

But we do not know justice and fear that we may have to concur with St John the Divine and the old-time Calvinists who saw it as

the perfect and inscrutable Will of God, revealed in Judgment, beyond human preparation and therefore beyond human control.

Lord Justice Scarman is a humane man of some little experience upon the bench. In 1981 there was unrest in England and many black men said they had been tortured by white police whilst in secret custody. Scarman proposed a cadre of "lay visitors", independent citizens empowered to inspect police cells and interview police prisoners by surprise at the time of the visitor's choosing. I am such a Lay Visitor. The local policemen have tedious and frequently sordid duties not relieved by existential paradox or intellectual discussions with cultured clients or learned counsel. Yet they impress with a nearly consistent tenor of matter-of-fact equanimity and brisk courtesy improved at one station by a cheerful *esprit-de-corps* and lively humor in the dingy basement where they must work. The criminals their clients are not exactly brutalised monsters either. They are mostly unintelligent and often opiated young men whose aspiration seems to devolve about cigarettes: Their source, availability and means of ignition. This is Policy in action: Everyone knows the rules and what happens next and banal questions are asked and answered and it is Christian names only in a tacit economy of mutual dependence. Reader, is this justice? Are its postcedents in the courtroom justice or their sequel in the prison?

I live in a conservative European monarchy that preserves the full panoply of kingly dominion. Whether we like it or not, military things dominate our society and our culture. The Army is very valuable to our highest and lowest classes and we have an impossibly high kind of officer called a Brigadier General. Now I am no expert, but it seems to me that all Brigadier Generals are Knights of the Realm. Legend has it that they have no ordinary duties, but patrol the London parks on gray steeds splendid in full uniform as they receive the obeisances of passers-by. They are the butt of many old English jokes, few suited to rehearsal in a devotional magazine. Their substantive function is the representation of British military intent in front of ambassadors and other exulted foreigners, work for which their execrable French and incomprehensible accents fit them perfectly. Notwithstanding the above, I should say that it was well within the occupational competency of a Brigadier General to agitate for the welfare of private soldiers. Some of them would, doubtless, regard such as a God-given privilege were it to become necessary. But I know well enough that such a mission would be the most perilous that such an officer could ever assume.

I teach in a technical college and this is Enrolment Week. Last Tuesday night a father brought his son to enrol on a GNVQ two-

year full-time course, which is an elementary commercial qualification for "non-academic" teenagers. The young man looked like a very tiny child to me and in my foolish way I turned to his father and asked his age. "Sixteen". I thought back to my days as a sixteen-year-old who had left school early with little and rudderless. I told the young man to forget GNVQ; to concentrate on the computing which he loved though colleagues elsewhere had rejected him for the appropriate course; to win a nest of good GCSEs; and re-consider his future in two years time from a position of strength. What was more, I said, do not do the GCSEs at my college; try a better one instead. I do not know what the shy and nervous young applicant made of all this but his father was not well-pleased though he forced a simper as we shook hands and parted. I may have shown mercy but did I do justly? My colleagues, many of them good men and women with young families, are desperate for work in an institution that has halved its size in ten years. Am I a traitor to those who kept me in work, my colleagues, my profession and my class?

Brigadier General José Francisco Gallardo Rodriguez commanded the Equestrian Center of The Mexican Army. In 1989 he was accused of stealing four thousand US dollars worth of government horse feed. He was "cleared...of any wrongdoing"². Then in 1993 these charges were "resurrected" and Gallardo additionally accused of destroying incriminating accounts. Subsequent to two courts martial, this officer was dishonorably deranked and sentenced to more than fifteen years in jail. I have just found another aging Reuters cable³ which sets the scene by stating:-

MEXICO CITY, March 31 [1998] (Reuters) - Disappearances and extrajudicial executions in Mexico are on the rise, arbitrary detentions are frequent and torture is common, human rights organisations alleged on Monday.

Now it would appear that Gallardo's real offense was his public complaint about the torture and abuse of serving Mexican soldiers by their own comrades and his advocacy of a "human rights ombudsman" for enlisted men. Readers who find this incredible may recollect the current state of ferment in Mexico and some of the circumstances attending the state of war in the Chiapas region. Neither should the allegations of peculation give my readers too much pause for thought for as a former trades union official I well understand the machinations of corrupt minds and their stratagems against honest men.

Read yesterday's letter from Señora Leticia Gallardo:-

**Tlalpan
August 11 1999**

¡Hello James!

Today is a total eclipse of the sun. ¡Congratulation! ¡you may see it!

In other things James, I big your pardon because until this time I'm answering your beautiful post-card (December 97), thank you for the support to foster us to go on with the struggle of human rights defense. My husband, General Gallardo, prisoner of conscience, still keeps his spirit up, thanks to you.

General Gallardo has been transferred to a civil prison. Although it is still an imprisonment, we think it is to be looked upon as a good sign, but, we are worried because in this places, there are many delinquents and attempt revolt or other things.

This way, we think that now is a good time to write anew to mexican President, I send you his dress.

With my warm regards, and I hope you have a nice summer.

**Yours Faithfully,
Leticia Enriquez de Gallardo**

I am ashamed to admit that the Señora's English is far superior to my Spanish, so I replied in these terms:-

**Bloxwich
8 September 1999**

Dear Señora Gallardo

Thank you for your kind letter of August 11 1999. Thank you also for writing in English. I am sorry that my knowledge of Spanish is not good enough to reply in your language. You were right, I did see the eclipse of the Sun that day and it was a most unusual and moving experience though here in Central England the occlusion was only 94%.

Be assured that the courage and goodness of your Husband remains a celebration for, and an inspiration to, men and women of goodwill worldwide. He is an example who transcends distinctions of faith race nation or class and will ever be in thought and prayer until he is restored to his rightful place of honor in the

Service of God and of his country. Your Husband has made great sacrifices to follow Him who first sought to be merciful and not to sacrifice and whatever life may bring to Brigadier General Gallardo his Faith shall not remain unrequited, nor shall his sufferings not bear fruit.

I have today written to Señor Ernesto Ponce de Leon to commend the restoration of your Husband to his high position of honor in your country for I believe that Brigadier General Gallardo has The Will of Christ and the welfare of His people at heart. I enclose a copy of my letter to your President.

I will continue to pray for the Serenity of your Husband and yourself and the Happiness of Mexico.

**Va con Dios,
James R Warren**

Readers may be interested to know that the Mexican Constitution specifically proscribes the participation of foreigners in internal affairs, and it is probably on that basis that forty (Vatican-accredited) priests have been deported from their parishes in the Chiapas. I did not know this when I chose to address Señor Zedillo in these terms:-

**Bloxwich
8 September 1999**

**To The Most Excellent
El Presidente de la Republica de la (sic) Estados Unidos de Mexico
Señor Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Leon**

Your Excellency

It is my distinct privilege to request Your Excellency to review the predicament of Brigadier General José Francisco Gallardo Rodriguez, a soldier of Mexico in peril.

A foreigner ignorant of the successes and problems of the Mexican people is understandably embarrassed to canvass what may be construed an insolent regard for your affairs. I am not a member of any «pressure group» or political organisation. I am socially far inferior to your servant General Gallardo and probably have views very different from his. As a Quaker pacifist I abhor his chosen vocation, and, as a Englishman, I respect and salute Your

Excellency's determination to resist interference by serving officers and your obvious rigor in upholding the Constitution of Mexico.

I am an ordinary man who is begging a man of honor to show clemency to a compassionate and honest person who is in his power.

Please release Brigadier General Gallardo to an honorable restoration of his rights and duties as a servant of your People because he is a good man who has tried to fulfill The Will of Christ as he understands it. ¿Can more be asked of us fallible men?

Forgive my failure to write this letter in Spanish: My command of your language is so poor it would not do justice to an educated reader.

May the Blessings of Our Divine Savior be upon Gallardo, Your Excellency and all of the People of Mexico, and Guide you always.

**Va con Dios,
James R Warren**

In the following month the Mexican Government replied:-

Palacio Nacional, 11 de Octubre de 1999.

F: 328988-58

**SR. JAMES R. WARREN
31 VICTORIA AVENUE, BLOXWICH WALSALL, WS3 3HS,
INGLATERRA**

ESTIMADO SR. WARREN

A nombre del Sr. Presidente de la República , Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, me permito acusar recibo de su escrito en el que:

EXPRESA SU CONSTERNACION POR LA DETENCION DEL GENERAL BRIGADIER JOSE FRANCISCO GALLARDO RODRIGUEZ, ASIMISMO, DESEA SE ADOPTEN MEDIDAS PARA GARANTIZAR SU SEGURIDAD Y LA DE SU FAMILIA

Sobre el particular, sirva este conducto para informarle que el Sr. Presidente quedó enterado del contenido de su comunicación.

**ATENTAMENTE
LA COORDINADORA DE ATENCION CIUDADANA**

LIC. LEONOR ORTIZ MONASTERIO

I have translated this below, and whilst my rendition contains crudities due to my poor Spanish, it may capture the spirit of the reply:-

The National Palace, 11 October 1999

F: 328988-58

**Mr James R Warren
31 Victoria Avenue, Bloxwich Walsall, WS3 3HS, England**

My Dear Mr Warren

In the name of the President of the Republic, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, permit me to acknowledge receipt of your document in which you:-

**EXPRESS YOUR DISMAY AT THE DETENTION OF THE
BRIGADIER GENERAL JOSE FRANCISCO GALLARDO
RODRIGUEZ, ALSO, YOUR WISH FOR US TO TAKE
MEASURES TO GUARANTEE HIS SECURITY AND THAT OF
HIS FAMILY**

Concerning the particular, I shall use the appropriate channel to certify that Mr President is well-informed of the contents of your communication.

**Yours Sincerely
Ombudswoman**

Leonor Ortiz Monesterio, LLB

Sources

- 1 Micah 6:8
- 2 "Mexico Tells OAS to Steer Clear of General Case"
David Luhnnow
(Intercepted Reuters cable of 31 March 1998)
<http://burn.ucsd.edu/archives/chiapasI/1998.03/msg00628.html>
- 3 "Rights Groups Say Torture, Abuse Endemic in Mexico"
Anonymous
(Intercepted Reuters cable of 31 March 1998)
<http://burn.ucsd.edu/archives/chiapas-/1998.03/msg00627.html>