IN CONVERSATION

Rowan Williams and Greg Garrett

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GG: Well, I think the last of the big areas that we had said we wanted to talk about was this conjunction of faith and politics. How do people of faith understand their relationship with power? What sorts of things are people of faith called to be doing at any given time? While I don't think I've ever stood any nearer to power than being the student council president in high school, you have been within arm's-length of a few people over the years, and people actually assumed that being archbishop granted you a certain amount of power, although it was really power to chase eighty million cats.

RW: Exactly, yes.

GG: But you have written a book called *Faith in the Public Square* [Bloomsbury, 2012], and think an awful lot about these questions of how we are both faithful and called to some sort of action.

RW: Yes, and I think any Christian thinking about this is going to be stuck from the word "go" because it's very clear that the fundamental model of the New Testament is that God's way of changing things is failure, and unplanned failure. It's as if the New Testament just plops that down in front of us and says, "Well, that's how it works," so you can't really deduce anything very systematic from that. That's

why I think Christians get in a bit of a muddle when they reflect on politics, because if you say, “Well, okay then, the thing to do is non-violence and all the rest of it.” If that’s your way of succeeding, then don’t expect it to be any better. Likewise, you have people who say, in effect, “Well, the Sermon on the Mount is all very well, but Jesus couldn’t have meant what he said, so let’s just do the realpolitik.” That’s not good enough either. This is where somebody like David Bentley Hart is so appropriately shocking and challenging. He writes in his introduction to his translation of the New Testament that there is just not going to be a system that will make this work. Therefore, there is not going to be, I think, for Christians, a big broad-brush political ethic. There is just going to be a human ethic. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. And sometimes you make compromises, and sometimes they fail, and that’s where, for me, the most illuminating presence in the twentieth century is [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer.

Not just his heroic witness, but also the way he writes in his book on ethics, the fragments on ethics I should say, which he was writing in the end of his life [*Ethics*, 1949]. The way he writes there about the penultimate goods, the ultimate things; the fundamental structures are there, and we’re always making quite complicated and iffy decisions about what will serve those ultimates. And what we mustn’t expect is justification. That is to say, we can engage, as he *well* knew, in more or less virtuous political action, but what we can’t do is produce a scheme which tells us, this is how you can be right, wherever you are.

That’s why, although I have always been, and still am, on the political left, I’m very cautious about elevating Christian socialism or something like to the status of a universally valid principle, because we’re just going to go on getting it wrong. There’s something about power itself which scripture simply queries. It doesn’t push it down and tramp all over it, it just says, “Really?” with any settlement we reach. So the effort—Bonhoeffer again—is to try and keep your eyes with integrity on the ultimates, to be uncompromisingly honest about the failures en route, the delusions, and, as he says, to hand it over to

Christ. Which is not at all a recipe for pacifism or political inactivity, it's just a caution, as he says, against a kind of political messianism.

GG: One of the tendencies that we have as a Christian family is to look at the same situation and see it differently based on our reading of scripture. Sometimes it's not even people who are far removed from each other exegetically. I think of the Niebuhrs [brothers Reinhold and H. Richard and their sister Hulda]—

RW: Yes.

GG: —Thanksgiving dinner at the Niebuhr family where they're arguing about pacifism and the role of society to create some sort of Christian good. So I wonder, what is a way for us to read scripture responsibly, do you think, that allows us perhaps to come to some agreement about what the Bible *really* has to say to us, and what it *really* is that we're supposed to be doing?

RW: At the heart of that, I guess, is what scripture has to say to us simply about being human, being in the image of God, before God, called by God, answerable to God. That's the human being God made, God is concerned with, God wants to see live and flourish. So when you take, corporally or individually, ethical decisions, collective decisions, personal decisions, you're thinking, partly, how does this act enhance or otherwise that fundamental place of human beings: before God, called by God, answerable to God. And if you find yourself in a situation where you can't see a clear way there, then make sure you say so. Make sure you recognize it.

GG: Yes.

RW: Don't pretend. In the classical political standoffs between freedom and security, the question is not, "Is there an all-time right answer?" For example: absolute freedom of speech is the supreme good in every situation. A classic liberal position. I think Christians, like a good many other ethicists, would say absolute freedom of speech is a good. It's an unmistakable good.

GG: Right.

RW: If that good is pursued and exercised in a way which is finally disempowering and demeaning, then you pay that price. Is that all right? To treat freedom of speech as an absolute good can *only* happen if we pay the price of certain people's suffering. Are we prepared to pay that price? If not, we have to pay the price of absolute freedom of speech, so it's keeping in view, I think, what best serves the long-term interest and well-being of the human beings who are there.

So, in the freedom of speech instance, I would say it's perfectly proper for governments to limit and to punish hate speech, to say that the absolute freedom to say of the racial, religious, or sexual other that they're something less than human is a freedom that has to give way to the need for those marginal voices not to be silenced. In other words, that would serve the longer-term goal of a public conversation in which every voice is audible, rather than a public conversation where somebody is about to shut someone else down. Roundabout way of putting it, but you see what I mean.

Likewise, I think in the ethics war, my instincts are largely pacifist and I am definitely a nuclear pacifist, in the sense that I cannot conceive a just nuclear war. It's literally unthinkable. There could be no justification for the indiscriminate human and environmental wreckage that would mean. But I find, again along with Bonhoeffer, I can't simply say, every imaginable conflict is wrong. And the just war tradition has not completely lost its substance. There are cases where it seems we have to take the risk, the large moral risk, of intervening for someone's protection, say, or our own. As the world gets more complicated in its military technology, the number of situations in which that risk is worth taking diminishes all the time, because conflict is so easily accelerated and so lethally accelerated these days.

GG: One of the things that I think could be helpful to us is just the reminder that it's important to read the Bible well when we're seeking a contemporary answer. At the time of our conversation, we're a week or two out from the American attorney general, Jeff Sessions, defending the separation of parents and their children coming to the United States, and citing a Bible verse—

RW: What was the verse?

GG: From Romans. [Romans 13:1] "Subject yourself . . ."

RW: Oh, to the authorities.

GG: To the authorities. We would make this caution in any case, that no one verse can stand for the whole Bible any more than one line can stand for a book, a novel, a poem even.

RW: Indeed.

GG: One of the things that was very heartening for me about the response to that statement was first that people talked about how scripture has to be read in its context, including its original context. You know, why does Paul say this? Well, why does Paul say anything? Because he is trying to speak to a circumstance, and it may not be every circumstance. He's speaking in a particular power structure and trying to situate Christianity within a particular power structure. What was heartening to me was how many Christian groups (including evangelical Christians, who have been allies to this administration, largely) simply said that that's not the message the Bible has for us. It's not this one thing you can use to justify anything the government does. It has been used in previous governments to do so. What about those thousands of verses about what Jesus called "the least of these"? What are we supposed to do with those people out of power, who God seems to look on most favorably because they are the people who most need our care?

RW: Yes. Yes, the people whose voices are being silenced. It's back to this question of what is the human dignity that scripture lays out, as God's fundamental will and purpose for us? All of that rests on the assumption that the human is what God loves passionately. The human is what God looks on with delight, as God looks with delight on the whole of creation of course, but very specifically that image of God's being which humanity is. You therefore have to ask, is this or that behavior, this or that policy, making it harder or easier for us to imagine the human as the object of God's passion and delight? And I think where you have children in cages, the answer is actually

a no-brainer. Or indeed where you have, as in both our countries unfortunately, penal policies which are systematically unjust, degrading. Unjust in terms of class and race. Degrading in terms of conditions and attitudes around them, and degrading to our politics overall because the issue is repeatedly ignored and swept under the carpet.

GG: Yes. One thing, and it's not a justification certainly but an explanation for it, is that we often make our moral and ethical decisions, even when we're people of faith, less out of our faith traditions than we do out of our partisan politics and our identities in those.

RW: And our economic position.

GG: And our economic position. I did an experiment for *Patheos* [patheos.com] back from 2010–2012, where for two years I did this very strange and disorienting thing. In writing about current events and the politics of the day, I tried to set aside my beliefs as a card-carrying Democrat and, as unencumbered as I could by the set of filters that all of us are encumbered by, to come back to the issue, and to look at the tradition, to look at the Fathers, to look at the teaching of the Episcopal Church, and to ask myself, does this in any way change the way that I think about this issue? And in some occasions it did. [The result was a book, *Faithful Citizenship*, 2012.] And I found that, just to give the easiest and most controversial example: as a Democrat, I had always believed in abortion as a sort of fundamental right, and I found my continuing belief that abortion is sometimes necessary to be very much complicated by the ethic of life that Christianity calls for. I had never stopped to consider that because in the Democratic party right now, to suggest that abortion be limited even, in any way, is—

RW: A sin against the Holy Ghost.

GG: Yes, it's a sin against the Holy Ghost. And there are comparable offences on the right.

RW: Yes. Yes, and that's a real eye-opener about the tribalism of our politics, and the way in which we approach our politics with package deals. If you are, in American terms, in favor of gun control, you are

obviously in favor of universally available abortion, and vice versa, you'd think. What's the slogan I've occasionally seen in the States? *Pro Life, Pro Guns, Pro God*. And I think, pardon?

GG: Yes.

RW: Maybe only two of those.

GG: Yes, I see the possible dilemma there.

RW: Yes. It must have been about twenty years ago, the late Cardinal [Joseph] Bernardin of Chicago [archbishop of Chicago from 1982–1996] was among those who launched what was meant to be a sort of comprehensive, joined-up approach to pro-life issues, which brought in questions about the death penalty, about the management of arms, and so forth, along with the traditional questions about abortion or about euthanasia. It seems to me that unless you make those joining-up of things not as a package deal, not as a set of tribal attitudes that are prescribed but as things that are genuinely linked together, really the moral discourse withers away. And the abortion question is certainly one of those where I'd say that we have demonstrated our great reluctance or inability to live with an imperfect moral vision. We haven't been able to sustain the idea that abortion is genuinely the taking of a human life, therefore genuinely a tragic event of loss generally speaking, and that there are conditions where perhaps the only thing that sustains the human dignity of a woman in those situations is the possibility of a termination, which is a very uncomfortable place to be when you've got absolutists bellowing in each ear.

GG: Right, right.

RW: Yet it seems to me that that's a recognition of the fact that we are not saved just by keeping rules, whether liberal or conservative.

GG: I wonder if this feels true for you here in England, but I think another of the problems that we have in this discourse about public life is that in America we often tend to think of it in terms of rights—

RW: Ah, yes.

GG: —as opposed to what I think in Christian terms we might think about as responsibilities. Because America has these rights that are enshrined in our foundational documents and that are assumed to sort of flow out—

RW: Yes.

GG: —into other places in the culture, where basically you are encouraged to make the most room for yourself, with the expectation that your rights are not going to be impinged on. That's a large part of our mythology. It's the open skies, it's the American West, it's the frontier do-as-you-please.

RW: Yes. But it's also something that affects the entire North Atlantic cultural world. Even in terms of the primary school which says to the child, "You can be anything you want to be." My heart goes out there because I fully understand that you might want to say to a child in a primary, sorry, elementary school, "Nothing is impossible for you." Because they don't understand their own potential, their own dignity, their own richness. And yet, a responsible education does also say to people, "You can't be anything you want." There are things like *you*, the person you (and any person) are, with the limits, the weaknesses, that just go with being a person. If you go through life imagining that what is owed to you is infinite possibility, you are heading for disaster, the wreckage of yourself and everybody around you. So how an educationist walks that line is a real challenge. To allow people to fail, which increasingly we're not very good at in our educational systems (as well as in otherwise)—

GG: No.

RW: To allow people to fail is the most humane thing we can do sometimes. To say, yes, this is wrong, or this is inadequate, this is a failure, and that's not the end of your world or mine.

GG: Right. One of the places where I find that that language is really important for us in the States is in the gun-control argument. It does sort of seem to be binary; it's all of it or none of it. I come

from a family that has guns, that shoots, that hunts. I don't have a gun, right now, because I'm also embracing that Christian pacifism.

RW: I'm pleased to note, as we speak.

GG: But many people that I love do have guns, and it does not make them bad people. There's first this assumption across that binary divide that the person with whom we disagree is fundamentally different from us, bad in some way. But I think there is that possibility, if we move back from the rights discourse to the responsibility discourse that's embedded in our tradition, that we can say, even if your right to have a gun is enshrined in our Constitution, is it possible that there is some point where you should embrace the responsibility of saying, "Is it a good thing for everyone to have a gun? Is it a good thing for everyone to have lots of guns? Is it a good thing for everyone to have lots of guns and as many bullets as they can fire out of a large magazine?" And the sort of conclusion that I came to in that experiment was that even though I personally support people having guns in a responsible way, as a Christian I also see the need to limit my freedom because it causes harm to my brother and sister.

RW: Which is simply a paraphrase of what St. Paul says in Romans, isn't it [Romans 14]? We just don't read that intelligently very often. Paul says, "Of course the food laws are irrelevant to your reconciliation with God. But the food laws may not be irrelevant to the message you are giving out to your fellow Christian." And if you go around saying, "Keeping the food laws is just a sign of how spiritually immature you are," then you know, time to go back to keeping kosher because you are just treading on the other person who is the object of God's passion and delight.

And the gun question, I suppose for us over in the UK, is one of the most deeply baffling cultural elements of the United States. Like most of us, I have to be honest that I cannot see the logic of widespread gun possession. Absolutely cannot see it. I can understand it historically, in terms of a militia-oriented society, but is that the truth today? And it's perfectly true, of course, as some people say, that stricter gun controls don't prevent violence and murder. It's perfectly

true that people kill people, guns don't. But the blindingly obvious question to me is, "So what are the conditions which make gun ownership a major threat to society, a major destabilizing element?" Of course, again, as we've been reminded, knives kill as well as guns do. But the question is, "What makes that possible? What makes that a way of life that people sign up for, what makes that a strategy people resort to?"

GG: Right.

RW: So it's important, I think, to put all of these questions, whether it's gun control, or abortion, whatever, into a social context. You have a social context where gun ownership is a really, or potentially, deeply destabilizing thing. Well, what's the issue should be obvious. If you put abortion into a context where terminations are disproportionately a matter for disadvantaged, disempowered women in impoverished social backgrounds, might you not think about what would make that a less attractive option for someone?

GG: We were talking, I think the other day, about how neither of our governments at this time seems capable of governing.

RW: Absolutely.

GG: And we have these huge issues separating us. And they're not all the same issues, but there's very much the sense that our leaders and our legislatures don't seem to be able to tackle these problems in any sort of way. In the States, we see that as largely a function of what it takes you to get elected, and the primary system which polarizes so dramatically and makes it impossible to govern with any sort of consensus because you have your constituents back home who have sent you to Washington or wherever, and they will not stand for compromise. And yet, what we often hear is that governance is the art of the imperfect.

RW: Yes. That's why I think the solution to our real crisis of democracy at the moment is probably encouraging people to get more experience in hands-on democracy. What does it actually take to run a town, or a district? If people are elected to office in a district of

the city or something like that, what makes that work? You have to do deals with the other people who will not go away. You have to consider what's achievable. You have to consider whether you will sacrifice the achievable for the perfect and therefore leave everybody pretty much where they were to start with. And that's the routine business of the local government, or even, for that matter, the government of a school, a golf club.

GG: Yes, any sort of governance.

RW: We all know that, yet mysteriously when it's elevated another layer up, we forget that, and we behave as if it were a zero-sum game. Now, drawing out on the actual experiences of people, making things work, is, I think, a much better strategy than just trading slogans. Getting more people to talk about their experience of having to govern, to run things, which so many people do have, and the point at which they will say, "This is what I have to do in order to make things work." The bizarre thing is, you have a president who talks about his skills as a deal-maker.

GG: A negotiator, yes.

RW: I don't see that in spades, I have to say. I think what he means is that he is somebody with some experience of getting results in the business world. But that's not actually governing, because you don't simply have to craft a deal, you have to make a program that people can cooperate with, sign up to, move forward with. And that's what we all seem to be afraid of, and in this country too, where the polarization of political discourse has just reached a very grim point. I'm not one of those who thinks that it's worse than ever. I was reviewing a book recently about the struggles around Catholic emancipation in the UK in the early nineteenth century [Antonia Fraser, *The King and the Catholics: The Fight for Rights, 1829*, 2018], and there were points where I looked up from the book and said, "Goodness, we think *we've* got problems." But what is illuminating is that you look at these historical mirrors and you see some of the same pathologies coming through: the demonization of others, the refusal for a

long time to imagine there could be another way of doing things. And then the drip, drip, drip, gradual recognition, *this has got to work*. This has got to be operative in such a way that it doesn't stop the trains running on time. This has got to work in such a way that children grow up safely. And slowly, people come around to saying, "Yes, we will have to find something we can all put our names to." That's one of the dangers, isn't it, of the campaign-style rhetoric that we take for granted now? I remember thinking during—well, during both elections, yours and ours recently—given the high temperature of the controversy during the campaign, whoever gets elected will have got elected on the back of so delegitimizing the other side that it would make no sense to collaborate with them. If these people are the demons—

GG: Right.

RW: —vile, evil, antipatriotic, all the passion and commitment that we've been saying they are for the last six months, why on earth should I offer to do a deal with them? Which is why I respect those, again, in your system and ours, who are prepared to say, "Yes, I disagree fundamentally with so-and-so, but I can respect where they're coming from, and I have a sense of how I might be able to find common ground." And in all the great moments, and there haven't been that many, sadly, in the last fifty years or so, where a little bit of light has appeared after decades of conflict—Northern Ireland, South Africa—it's been those moments where people have somehow found the capacity to look at one another and say, "You are still a stranger, you are still in some ways an enemy, but I know that together we have got to make this work for everybody else, because we are not important enough to dictate everybody else's fate, we have to make this a society that is livable here."

GG: It reminds me, you talked about the sort of bright spots, of which there have been so few of late. I was thinking about the convention rallies of the last election cycle [2016] in America, and often, as you said, how hateful, how charged the rhetoric was. And I was thinking of a general election a ways back, where our Senator McCain, John McCain, was a presidential candidate, and one of

the delegitimizing pieces of rhetoric about Barack Obama was that he was from another country, he was a secret Muslim, he was all of these things. We have had more recent candidates who not only would have encouraged people to speculate on that, but would have started those controversies.

RW: Naming no names.

GG. Naming none. But I remember a rally at which this woman got up and asked McCain a question and started saying terrible things about Barack Obama, about how he wasn't fit to govern America, he wasn't American, any of those things. And McCain stopped her. A lot of our readers will remember this, because it stands out for many of us. He said, "You know, I disagree with him fundamentally about how our country should be run. But I believe he is a good human being, a decent human being. I don't want to listen to this defamation of his character."

RW: I remember that moment, and I wish that could be run on continuous loop, really.

GG: That seems to be one of the things that we're called to, those of us who are in power, those of us who want to speak back to power, that reminder that, as you were saying, we are all in this together, we are all a part of this human experiment. We are all children of God, and God loves you just as much as He does me, even though we have these fundamental disagreements.

RW: That's right. The sense that there is genuinely a common human project means that I cannot, finally, isolate my good or my hope from yours. They've got to be convergent somewhere along the line.

GG: Yes.

RW: And that can be a very long way along the line, but that's our faith, and that surely is what, again, what the New Testament lunges us toward, in saying that the optimal human community, the body of Christ, is one where it is absolutely basic that everyone's destiny is tied up with everybody else's.

But I think also this brings us back to some of our earlier conversations about language, and we talked about responsibility, which belongs to those of us who have faith in this setting, but also the responsibility that rests on those of us who use language, imaginatively or creatively. And I think it's an important part of seeing this as a genuine vocation, that we are called on somehow to do things with language that are not weaponized. To use language in a way that looks for recognition, that opens rather than closes doors. And that's not, again, to back away from conflict in all circumstances, or to say, "Well, if everybody just talked to each other the world would be nicer." It is to say we have a task to work at language to show its complexity, to show its diverse, rich relationship to the reality of our relations, rather than just treating it as yet another means of diminishing or disempowering others. There's a real morality about writing, I think.

GG: And that counts for any of the kinds of writing that we do as people of faith. I have, as you do, various ways that I push writing out into the world. We talked about the pulpit earlier, we both write essays and articles and op-ed pieces, and I think you're absolutely right that we have this responsibility to convey that whatever our disagreements, we have this powerful sense that there are still more ways that we are alike than unalike. And that we seek these goods that Bonhoeffer would have told us are the things around which we can somehow find agreement. Where that happened in the States, the week before this conversation, was in the immigration policy separating children from their parents at the border. People who had been on all sides of the issue on immigration said that this is absolutely wrong. Whatever we feel about people coming to this country, or the conditions under which they come, this is an absolute violation of their humanity. And we can agree on this even though we may not agree about everything around this issue.

RW: Yes. A crucially important moment, I think. Because again it comes back to what sort of humanity are you seeing and serving

here, and what kind of model of humanity is served by tearing a child away from its parents. No good saying, "Well, that's what the law says," because in that case, clearly there's something wrong with the law. Certainly with the way you're administrating it.

GG: I've been thinking about [Henry David] Thoreau a lot the last few weeks. I often teach *Civil Disobedience* [1849], and there are all these wonderful pieces connected there: there's [Thomas] Aquinas talking about unjust laws, and you move forward from Thoreau to [Mahatma] Gandhi, and then you've got [Martin Luther] King in this line of people reflecting on the law, and what makes a law a law worth following. I'm thinking right now about what it is that people of faith can do when they see a law that is manifestly un-Christian. Both here and in the States, I know there have been lots of demonstrations. I expect when our president shows up [in the UK] next week, if he shows his face in public, there will be a number of people reflecting—

RW: I shouldn't be surprised.

GG: —some animosity back toward him. But I wonder, what can people of faith do, particularly at a time when they don't feel like their political systems answer to them?

RW: Indeed. And also at a time when they feel their own moral credibility has been undermined, in some ways, by failure and misconduct. I think in this country, and Ireland, and to some extent in the States and Australia, the whole miserable history of collusion in sexual abuse has undermined the church's moral credibility in a range of areas.

GG: Right.

RW: Although we hope and pray the worst practice is a thing of the past, the shadow is a long one. So yes, it won't do just to say, "We *are* the moral compass," because people will say, "Really?" and point to the record.

GG: What about this, and this.

RW: But I think what we can say sometimes is—to go back to the way I put it just now—what we can say is to pose the question, "What kind of humanity does this serve? If you do this, what does that show about your attitude to the human?" And I think it's perfectly right that Christians in so many denominations can say, if we have colluded with or not taken seriously enough the reality of sexual abuse of children or vulnerable people, then clearly the message we have given out is that their humanity is of no interest to us. And that's the message that people have received and, quite rightly, turned against. So, if we are honest about our repentance here, maybe we can be heard a bit more clearly. Again, that's something I keep coming back to. Repentance as something other than the mark of failure. Repentance is something which is helpful. It's the ability to say, I did this, I failed in this way, and I know that that did not kill me, because I know I have a Redeemer. I have a Divine Lover that does not let me off, or blot out what I've done, but says, "Now let's work through these consequences for your life rather than for your death, shall we?"

GG: The great model for us in the States, of course, is the nonviolent civil rights movement.

RW: Of course.

GG: And Dr. King was the most visible figure in a nation-wide movement. This is the fiftieth anniversary, as we're talking here in 2018, of Dr. King's death. He is remembered now for the successes, most of them taking place in the American South, in a cultural setting where he was able to operate in a different way than in the Northern cities. We also forget that when he started taking on other issues—when he took on economics, poverty, the Vietnam War—that it was harder to gather a coalition around those things, even though he saw—

RW: He saw a connection.

GG: He saw a connection between all of them. And the thing that I think about now, as we reflect on the fiftieth anniversary of what we think of as the great success of a Christian movement in politics, is that when King died, he really thought of himself as a failure.

RW: As a failure.

GG: That had he lived longer, we might think of him differently than we do. Yet it feels to me that the lesson he gave, that nonviolent mobilization of, of failure, as you put it, he gave as the Christian model.

RW: Yes.

GG: As unsexy as it is, as unwinning as it is in this zero-sum game that politics has become, for me that's still the compelling model for what we're called to do.

RW: Yes. Yes. It's to do with witness, which as I grow older I come to see as a more and more fundamental category. Bearing witness. It is possible to live like this, indeed die like this. It's possible. And just to do it, never mind the impact, never mind the output. Just to do it, says, "This is real." And again, that connects back with some of what we were saying about Shakespeare, doesn't it? The tragic. It's not that you're looking for a happy ending, but you're looking for some contact with what is essential, what is real. Certainly one of the things that moves me most about Martin Luther King's legacy, as he described it, is—well what comes to mind is Paul's words: "I was not disobedient in the heavenly calling" [Acts 26:19]. As if throughout his life, he was aware of a calling to witness, and he never said no. He was a flawed man. He was not always a wise man. But he was a faithful man, in that respect.

GG: Yes, and we talk about *faithful to the end*.

RW: We do.

GG: That last speech of Dr. King's in Memphis, which is, to my mind, maybe the most powerful, because he is thinking very much about his death ["I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968]. That speech begins with his—it was a fairly routine sort of thing, because there had been a bomb threat, and so they had searched the plane, and the baggage, and the plane was delayed because of that. I think that we forget that for most of the years of his adult life, King

lived with that level of threat. And in fact, his house was bombed. There was this potential for violence, and for his witness to end, as it ultimately did, and yet he showed up every single day, imperfect as he was in some other ways. To live as faithful a life as that is an incredible witness.

RW: Yes. That's the gift to the life of the body that he has made and still makes. And I think too—well, I have both their pictures up there—King and Oscar Romero. Romero is being canonized this fall.

GG: Yes.

RW: Thank the Lord.

GG: You know, King makes me think of the other sort of response that the church can make at a time when there is this discord in the body politic. It is our responsibility to confront, to confront the unjust laws and to call us to better behaviors, drawn out of our understanding through the tradition. But it's also comfort. It's not just a temporal comfort, although I take comfort in the solidarity that exists among my faith community, there are these things that we agree are not acceptable and we can work together toward them. But it also goes back to the larger redemptive question that you brought up, which is, whatever is happening in this present moment, however sin and death are manifesting themselves in the world at this moment, that battle is won.

RW: Yes. Yes.

GG: If we can just remember that. That is the heart of what we understand. And as King said in that final speech, I may not see it, which is the tragic irony of his delivering that speech the night before he died, but it's also the reality. Because none of us ever really sees it. We see movement. A movement here, a movement there. I think of Archbishop [Desmond] Tutu, who is one of the great figures of the past hundred years in reconciliation, and the places where movement still needs to happen in his country and around the world. But there is an incredible comfort to know that in the cosmic sense, we are

loved and valued and redeemed, regardless of what is on the front page of the *New York Times* today.

RW: Yes, indeed. *The fight is o'er, the battle done, now is the victor's triumph won* ["The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done," translated by Francis Pott]. That's the Easter proclamation, and far from its being a statement that everything is all right *really*, it says, everything is not all right, but is beneath the hands of God, specifically the wounded hands of Christ, and there is nothing that can extinguish that divine fidelity to us. When we're thinking about the comfort the church gives, I think the most important thing, very often, we can give, is that embodied assurance that people are not alone, they're not abandoned.

GG: Right.

RW: That's another form of just turning up, you and I know, that often pastorally the only thing we can do is to be there for someone, without words. When the church is present in a community of deprivation and struggle and suffering, in our countries, or South Sudan, or the Solomon Islands, or Brazil, or wherever, what it's saying is, "You, this community, you are worth spending time with. God spends God's time with you. And the church spends God's time with you, and in you, and among you." And there's the hope, that what we are connected to in that moment is something whose potential and possibility can never be extinguished. And what do we say but "Hallelujah."