

We Preach Christ Crucified – Lent 2002  
6 – Christ our Passover  
Being Good – Unreasonable Demands

Text

Notes

[S]omething has gone wrong if *extreme demands* are placed squarely in the centre of ethics. The centre of ethics must be occupied by things we can *reasonably demand* of each other. The absoluteness of the fanatic, or the hair shirt of the saint, lie on the outer shores. Not wanting to follow them there, or even not able to do so, we still have plenty of standards left to uphold. We should still want to respond to the reasonable demands of decency. We may not be able to solve all the world's problems, but we should do our best with the ones we can solve. So the right reaction is to look for moral principles that are not impractical, and not limitless in their demands. Adhering to anything more stringent might be saintly, and admirable, but it is not *demande*d of us. In the standard phrase, it is above and beyond the call of duty.

A different example of a bid to escape the stringency of behaving well is the excuse of 'dirty hands'. It's a bad business manufacturing arms, or selling cattle prods to various regimes. But, says the manufacturer (or the government), if we don't do it someone else will. Then they have the jobs and reap the rewards. The arms and prods get made just the same, so why should we sacrifice our well-being for the benefit of our competitors? The moralist, standing erect and looking at the heavens, is simply out of touch with the needs of the market. Ethics is all very well, but perhaps we cannot afford it. At least the dim mole earns his living.

There is something grubby, not only to Kant but to most of us, about the excuse that this argument offers us. We have some sense that we should keep our own hands clean, however much others will then dirty theirs. The excuse is not open to a person of strict honour or integrity, however convenient it may be in practice. In many areas, it is not over and above the call of duty to keep our own hands clean.