

Sunday 8 February:
The Third Sunday Before Lent
Readings: 1 Cor. 9.16-33; Mark 1.29-39

A DIALOGUE FOR LIFE

A friend of mine came to see me on Friday. "I have had enough of religion," she said, "I am sickened by it." She had good reason to be; she had just come back from the Archdiocese of Jos in Nigeria. In November 2008 in the wake of local government elections violence had broken out which presented itself as largely between Christians and Muslims. There are no precise figures for the dead but it is estimated that more than 300 people died, with many others maimed and injured. Churches, mosques, homes, property and businesses were destroyed. It grew increasingly ugly. People from the Cathedral were killed and houses adjacent burnt down. A Muslim school was set on fire leaving six children dead and many others injured. Since the unrest the city of Jos has been under curfew. "I could not believe some of the things I heard: there is such fear, prejudice, and hatred." "The thing is" she said, "this kind of religion is so contrary to everything I believe and yet it is sometimes being propagated in the name of Christ."

"So you've had enough of religion?"

"Yes, I have, except..."

"Except what?"

"Except I met other Christians and priests who showed a different way, like their Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama. This man is different."

"In what way?" I ask.

"On the wall of his house I noticed he had written a quotation. He didn't have quotations everywhere just this one quotation: "Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with your God." I think the reason that I noticed it was that it confirmed what I witnessed in him. He has such warmth and humanity, such longing for justice, such courage and yet such humility. Before the conflict he had worked to build better relationships between the faith communities. In November he had managed to persuade Christian leaders to meet with Muslim leaders in a mosque. They had talked and eaten – given the level of prejudice this seemed a real breakthrough - and then six days later and the violence had erupted. The Archbishop had felt that everything had come tumbling down about him, and the deaths had shattered him. But he had been undeterred. The following day after the violence he had visited the camps of the displaced with the Muslim leader, the Emir of Wase. He is a man absolutely engaged with the problems of the present and yet somehow he sees beyond them. He talks about 'A dialogue for life' a dialogue which he sees as an absolute necessity for both Christians and Muslims."

"Archbishop Ignatius says a dialogue for life speaks to normal everyday relations where people of different faiths and cultures share the same space and resolve difficulties. It never resorts to, or countenances violence. A dialogue of life seeks to listen to the voice of the voiceless, it seeks real solutions, and a programme of social outreach in health, education, and opportunity which reaches across both Christian and Muslim Communities."

Archbishop Ignatius says “the aggressive use of the media and the promise of material prosperity gives the impression that religion is NOT about eternal values but about earthly progress and domination of the other. There must be a shift from competitiveness to genuine encounters. It is obvious that peace and love are attributes that both Christianity and Islam promotes. But such conflict in our country indicates that some Christians and Muslims are yet to know that genuine religion is centred on the love of God and neighbour and must express itself in a practical spirituality that accepts and respects others’ beliefs and way of life.”

I asked my friend how the Archbishop’s views were going down in his church.

“There are those who see his integrity and support him, there are others who are afraid of his views because they seem to demand too much. They risk too much. As a priest in Nigeria you have position, status, income: but he is asking his clergy to reach out, vulnerable and unarmed. What he is asking is dangerous. Many people want a religion which will defend and protect them. What he is asking them for is offering like in the Gospel.”

“And what do you think?” I asked her.

“I think the Archbishop is living the only Gospel I believe in, and in doing so he risks everything.” That is perhaps the true cost of discipleship.

Listening to my friend’s description of the Archbishop and some of his priests I began to feel that far from losing her faith she had found it.

Nigeria may seem far away from a country where the British Humanist Society advertises on the buses “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Yet it seems we are worrying and not enjoying ourselves yet it’s got nothing to do with God and much more to do with fear and competitiveness and the loss of “real human encounter.” In 2007, UNICEF rated the UK bottom of a league of industrialised countries for child well-being, saying our children were under-educated, unhappy and unhealthy compared with other European countries. This week a children’s report commissioned by The Children’s Society claimed after extensive research that this was caused by enforced competition and stress of a society which seems to be placing more emphasis on material success than relationships and time for parental love. “The aggressive pursuit of material success is by now the greatest threat to British children.” What are we offering our children?

I have always loved today’s Gospel reading. In a frantically busy ministry Jesus makes space and time for those closest to home. His first actions of healing are specific, local, practical – carried out by “Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter’s son.” “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” the neighbours are to ask. Jesus helps a disturbed man in the local synagogue in Capernaum and then takes time to go to the house of his disciples Simon and Andrew to help their mother-in-law who is in bed with a fever. It has always seemed to me to illustrate a simple truth: that charity – *caritas*, benevolence, love, ‘good will to all’ – begins at home. The kingdom is not the empire beyond... the kingdom is here and now within us. It is something immediate and practical, if only we could see it. I remember when I was the Chaplain of a community of Brothers they would come to me to ask about their plans for the

future. After they had been a Brother should they do this, or become a priest, or undertake a training course- what should they do next? Of course I tried to be helpful in discerning their future – how often I have myself asked the same question – but I always wanted to ask them “Yes, but what are you going to do today?” Because here and now in their own village or home or context it seemed that they had the gifts and the love to do so much.

What attracted me about my friend’s story of Archbishop Ignatius was not the success or popularity of his ministry but the fact that here was a man trying to live the words he had written on his wall despite the difficulty and conflict this would inevitably lead him into: act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with your God – the inner man in tune with the outward witness. It was not some grand vision somewhere out there. It was actually our Gospel. It was something that must begin at home today – like a day of fun in the snow where everyone suddenly became human again. The ministry of Jesus begins with the healing of your own community.

The other thing that strikes me about today’s Gospel is that Peter’s mother-in-law is healed and immediately starts to serve them. How often we think of service as something rather demeaning to us, but is it? Or can it not be an expression of love and gratitude, a reciprocity, so that having received we long to give? The other day I was talking to a young Chinese Vietnamese man who delivers take-away food. “You’re so lucky being a priest” he said to me “because you have the chance to do good things and help people and stuff. My job is just empty; it’s nothing, just for money, but when I do help someone with something it just makes me feel better all day.” “Well, I think you have helped me today,” I said to him. It was like wake-up call.

What today’s Gospel makes me long for is that integrity, where our faith is not about some external show, that we put on in order to defend or survive or gain influence or power, or to support an agenda or a prejudice. It is a faith where pretence is stripped away, it is not a façade we put on, but an opening up, a recognition of the true humanity of those we live with and the true humanity of ourselves. Our faith is actually not about words or intellect or argument, it is actually a lived Gospel – a kind of transparency where the inner life is reflected in the outer life – not a transparency which exposes but a transparency which opens us to a depth of hope beyond us. “Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with our God.” One sees the whole person: saintliness and sinfulness, strength and weakness, an inner and outer integrity, the image of life flowing. True religion is a dialogue for life.

Our vicar on the front cover of today’s newsletter puts it this way: “In an economic downturn there is a great opportunity to rediscover our values and how and why we belong together. A church has a lot to contribute to that process.”