

Sunday 31 August 2008: Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Everything is Connected

Readings: Romans 12. 9-end; Matthew 16. 21-end

“Bless those who persecute you bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another, do not be proud but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought of what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” .

(Romans 12.17-19)

These are the words of St Paul in today’s Epistle to the Romans. Last Sunday when I arrived home from my holiday this whole area of central London from Trafalgar Square to Buckingham Palace was in the midst of very joyful celebration. The place was packed with people celebrating Team GB’s Olympic triumphs, finally Great Britain, not forgetting Northern Ireland, seemed to have had some sporting success worth really celebrating. For our Mayor of London and other politicians there was a lot of political mileage in all of this. Boris Johnson, after his own rather mediocre performance of flag waving, was encouraging that every man, woman, boy or girl given the right encouragement and resources could become future Olympians so that still more gold medals would be ours. For someone like myself, whose only sporting achievement has been second place in the Cub Scout’s egg and spoon race, this sounded rather fanciful, nevertheless I too felt caught up in the joy of the occasion. It was brilliant to see these athletes, Brilliant to watch their talent, grace, determination, beauty and speed. Of course it was good to see Team GB win but one’s joyful appreciation was not limited to nationality: look at the excitement over Usain Bolt from Jamaica winning the 100 and 200metres, or Kenenisa Bekele from Ethiopia winning the 5000metres and 10,000 metres? We were celebrating the gifts of others. Vicarious victory. I loved watching the celebrations in the streets of Jamaica: their athletes belonged to all of them but also to all of us. We don’t have to do everything ourselves we can share the triumphs of a human family widening far beyond ourselves “Rejoice with those who rejoice” says St Paul. But if we share the successes of humanity we also share in some degree its shame and its pain. At the same time as the Olympic celebrations there was constant coverage of the infamous former pop star and convicted sex offender Gary Glitter trying to find a country who would have him and being hounded by the world’s press who were even crawling down the aisles of the aeroplane to get close-up photos of him. This endless vilification with seemingly no possibility of forgiveness was so fierce and relentless that it left one feeling sickened and uneasy. If the Olympian reminded us of what we could achieve the disgraced pop star reminded us of how far our humanity can fall and cause terrible pain to others and ourselves: “weep with those who weep”.

Paul’s epistle is calling us to a deeper sense of shared humanity, empathy, and compassion - the knowledge that the joys of the triumph, and pain of the sins, are in many ways shared by us all. That we are, in that well known Pauline analogy, “one body,” intimately connected to all our members. And the way each person lives and responds to another, for good or ill will leave its mark on all of us. At the beginning of the Lambeth Conference in which Anglican Bishops from all around the world met to pray together, talk together, and rediscover the source of their Christian and Anglican values mission and identity, Bishop Duleep de Chikera, the Bishop of Colombo, preached. Archbishop Rowan Williams visited Sri Lanka last year and witnessed the ministry of Bishop Duleep in the midst of the conflict and tragedy in Sri Lanka –he must have been moved by Duleep’s deep commitment to justice,

reconciliation and interfaith friendship, his daily carrying of the cross even in intractable situations. His trust was not misplaced for Duleep spoke from the pain of his own experience and a faith in God tried in adversity. He preached that God gives the agenda out of the cries of the world and that “the world in pain, in and after this conference, **must** receive the energy and spirituality of our church”. He said: “the Anglican Communion must always give the highest priority to our invitation from Christ to participate with Christ in the transforming of the world: to bring healing, peace, justice, reconciliation and abundant life.” But he said that as a church we too are a wounded community, some had chosen not to come to Lambeth: “the crisis is complex and ahead there is a long and arduous journey.” Citing Christ’s parable of the wheat and the tares he urged all parties to stay together. “In the words of the master let the wheat and the tares grow together. If we are determined to uproot the unrighteous none will remain. We are all, each one of us a mixture of wheat and weeds.” He ended with three challenges to the Anglican Communion. First we must return to the tradition and practice of self scrutiny, evaluate and examine our own lives, be hard on ourselves with Christ only as our measure - removing the log from our own eyes which blinds us before the speck in our neighbours. Secondly our Communion must rise to the challenge of unity in diversity. There is enough of Christ to go round. “Ours must be an inclusive communion where there is space for everyone, regardless of gender, wealth, ability, race or sexual orientation”, he said, we drink from the same chalice of Christ’s blood. And thirdly our church must be prophetic in being the voice of the voiceless and calling into accountability those who abuse power. He concluded with a quotation from William Temple: “The Church is the one institution that does not live for itself” and all our energy, all our gifts are directed to abundant life for the other.

This was a theme returned to again and again by Archbishop Rowan Williams - the Christian is the one called to speak words of life to the other, not words of oppression and death. As Paul says in today’s epistle: If your enemies are hungry... feed them, if they are thirsty give them a drink... Do not be overcome by evil but be overcome evil with good.” Rowan Williams took up the theme of the interconnectedness of our world, the realisation that each one of us, each person is diminished by the pain of another person and enriched by the holiness of another and if we say that we no longer can hear the pain of another, we can no longer feel empathy with a homeless man in London, an asylum seeker seeking a safe home, a mother and her family in the cyclone of Myanmar, a Zimbabwean beaten with sticks because he has voted for the opposition, or a sinner who has lost the way: if our church is not living this connectedness with humanity then God forgive us and help us for we have lost Christ the Word who became flesh and lived among us. Rowan said “this is unity... this is our calling - to let the son of God be revealed in us, to be a sign of a unity that brings alive that deep connectedness in the human world. Let the gathering Christ be revealed in us, the one in whom all these lives hold together.”

And did we change? That’s the question. But look how long it took Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness to shake hands. And how many died in the meantime. I think at the Lambeth Conference Bishops listened to the humanity of the other. Opinions and positions take time to change. Defences and prejudices are often strengthened not weakened by a frontal assault. But Christ leads us around the fences to live on the other side of the barricades. At the Lambeth Conference our Bishops tried walking together. A love for our Church and for our neighbour came out of hiding - upheld by the prayers of Anglicans from around the world. A gay American priest told me he had a long conversation with a Bishop from the Sudan after the Sudanese Bishops had condemned Bishop Gene Robinson. “I was angry and hurt but after our conversation in which we both expressed our different opinions he took me by the hand and I was aware that his hand was very soft”. Sometimes when we actually meet as people our hands and hearts are gentler than our opinions.

A group of Bishop's Spouses are discussing human sexuality. The lines are clearly drawn. There are the conservatives and the liberals and those somewhere in the middle and those who would far rather be talking about something else. And then one wife tells of how her husband because of his liberal attitude has been victimised by the diocese and even by members of their own family, and even her children have been pulled in. And because her pain and experience is so real as she tells the story she begins to cry and suddenly there no longer seems to be liberals or conservatives or fence sitters around the table but women trying to comfort a mother who feels abandoned and they are with her for each one of those around the table, each one has their own experience of abandonment and pain and longing for a God who can bring healing and strength.

Daniel Barenboim the pianist's new book is called *Everything is Connected*. He writes music that could be a model for society. "It teaches us the importance of interconnectedness between transparency, power and force". At his youth orchestra, Arabs and Israelis, tackle great music and they discover that the other is not a monster, but a vulnerable human being like themselves. This may sound simple or naïve but it is no small revelation in a world where opposing factions refuse to acknowledge one's right to exist.

Early last Sunday morning I heard Bishop Richard Holloway talking about his new book. It is called *Between the Monster and the Saint*. I strained to wake up to capture what he is saying because it sounded important. Richard Holloway asks "to what extent will we let force, in any of its forms, turn us into people who treat others as things?" The next day I buy his book: he writes "We live in a harsh world, incredibly cruel. It is a gentle world unbelievably beautiful. It is a world which can make us bitter, hateful rabid destroyers of joy. It is a world that can draw forth tenderness from us as we lean towards one another over broken gates. It is a world of monsters and saints, a mutilated world but it is the only one we have been given. We should let it shock us not into hatred or anxiety, but into unconditional love."

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