

Sunday 29 June 2008: Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Inspirational People

Readings: Acts 12. 1-11; Matthew 16. 13-19

Our Children's Club or C-Club have been passing around a survey asking us who are the inspirational people of our lives. If you haven't filled in their survey yet perhaps they'll catch you today. Which person in your life has inspired you? It's a good question and it has certainly got me thinking and longing to see what other people have written. In fact we spent most of this week's clergy staff meeting talking about it. Last week we couldn't think of that many bishops to put on the list, perhaps it's not in the job description or perhaps it's the daily news of those Gatcom bishops meeting in Jerusalem and boycotting the Lambeth Conference which made the Church sound so terribly full of prejudices and so uninspiring. Many of the names we came up with, in terms of godly or holy women and men who had excited others to holiness, were those who had lived in some way outside the system or at least on the margins of things, counter-culturally, uniquely, on the edge, where the raft meets the sea. People who had somehow made us see things a different way, a better way, and awakened in us that longing to be part of that vision or life. But perhaps today more than ever we have become a bit cynical of the possibility of finding an inspirational person, as though it's a façade – a celebrity who is only as good as his last goal or concert, a star upon whom the media will eventually dish the dirt.

The Inspirational Person I had chosen to talk about to the C-Club last week was St Francis, a bit obvious perhaps but still 800 years on one capable of inspiring me. What a witness for the issues of today offering liberation from consumerism, brotherhood and sisterhood with one another and with all of creation, and a way of crossing the faith boundaries to make friends with birds, lepers, beggars and princes and Muslims. I can still remember the words of Carlo Corretto, the Little Brother of Jesus who wrote:

Stumbling under the weight of the contradictions of our lives
we glimpsed within ourselves a place of simplicity and light
horrified by our own selfishness... we glimpsed the possibility of true freedom and authentic love.

Bored by a conformist life, we suddenly saw ourselves out on the streets of the world
– bearers of a message of light and love of all sisters and brothers...

This is when Francis entered our life.

And this is what St Francis says: The Gospel is true. Live the Gospel and you will see.

'What person has inspired you?' The more I thought about it this week the more I realised how many people have inspired me, and it wasn't even about whole lives... more about moments of light which somehow changed things and you never forget. Who do I remember? I remember a Franciscan Brother in a completely bare room with a simple cross on the wall. "That's a nice cross", I said. "It's for you", he said and gave it to me. He seemed so radically free. I remember losing that cross in the long grass by the brown swimming pool and searching for it at night. It seemed to represent the person I wanted to be where gift was total. I remember Mrs. Pengilly, the teacher I loved at Primary School who taught me to write without fear of spelling or punctuation but as something exciting, an expression of self... I never learnt to spell but I learnt to love writing. Or Mr Scott, my literature teacher at secondary school, who at first seemed weird, awkward and remote as he ambled down corridors, mocked at a distance... and then proceeded to open my eyes through literature and

poetry. "I find it disconcerting" he said, "to find my own ideas served back to me... I want you to think for yourself."

So many people, there are some people so close to you that you almost take them for granted. One of the people who answered the questionnaire wrote the name of her husband. How wonderful to be inspired by the person you have lived with and slept with for so many years. There are others who inspire us from further away or from a long time ago... people who once even for an instant imparted that sense of hope and possibility and a life beyond worth living for. The dignity of Nelson Mandela celebrating his 90th birthday, the twinkling impish faith of Desmond Tutu last month at St Martin's, or the childlike depth of wisdom of the Dalai Lama, in the face of such opposition and Chinese, the poetry of Shakespeare capable of creating the complexity of humanity in your ears and before your eyes, the passion for the poor of Archbishop Romero. And of course those you no longer take for granted because you are parted but whose memory lives on. Like the courageous gentleness of Brother Francis Tofi who died for peace.

I have been inspired in the last few weeks as I have found out more about the life of a very faithful member of our parish: Ruth Davies, whose funeral will be held on Monday. A seemingly very private and contained person. I had to search for information about her. But the person who emerges as you put the pieces together is a woman of great humility, kindness, insight and gifts; a woman who always surprised us with the freshness and originality of her thought, who read Greek and Latin, and modern languages and whose sister said: "I think she was learning Chinese". Ruth loved archaeology and her garden and scrumping apples, St Martin-in-the-Fields and adventure, apparently she even wanted to do a parachute jump. As her brother David said "what my sister had in her head was just amazing!" Inspiration is sometimes hidden, in this case under a blue mac and a hat pulled well down.

Of course, if you dig around you will also find that **none** of these inspirers are perfect people. In fact if they were perfect the inspiration would not be so real. These are all people who have faced their own demons and struggles and not always emerged with their pride or dignity intact. In fact when you really begin to know them you will uncover their vulnerabilities and their lesser moments: their irritations, their foibles, their moods, the things that annoy and we can't understand. In fact most of them will have passed through very painful struggles to have reached those moments of light. And actually the greatest inspiration comes from the knowledge of that real humanity, that their lives are as confusing as our own and they too have feet of clay. We find inspiration in the realness of it all: in the moments of blasphemy, failure, frustration and even shame when somehow we discover too the underlying orientation of love and empathy.

If you want to believe in Papal infallibility I don't think St Peter, who we celebrate today, is the right foundation stone. He seems to get it wrong so many times. What a wonderfully human rock on which Christ builds his Church: the one who tells Christ to have nothing to do with him because he's a sinner but the one too who leaves family, boat and fisherman's trade to follow.

Peter is so unschooled, so unfinished, so humanly far from the kingdom of God and yet so close to it – capable of moments of incredible intuition and insight like his recognition of Jesus. When Jesus asks "Who do you say that I am?", Peter is the one more than all the others who has seen and recognised: "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God" and yet with the glow of Christ's affirmation and praise still ringing in his ears a moment later he is the one who totally misses the plot and rebukes Jesus for saying that he must suffer and die in

Jerusalem. And yet even this failure is so recognisably ours too: for who wants a Messiah who is going to lead us into trouble, and who among us would not hope that we can extend the party and not have to face the agony of loss? Yes, on this very human rock Christ says he will build his Church in the profound knowledge that both Peter and all of us who come after are going to need an awful lot of his help to hold this thing together. In fact we can also read this text to mean that the rock is Peter's faith and it's only his faith in Jesus Christ which is capable of holding things together and bringing new life. It's going to be a very tough learning process. This is Peter who will turn away from his master and sink in chaos: the one who will say "I will never betray you" and yet on the same night will disown Jesus three times. This is Peter, called by Christ over and over again "Do you really love me? Then feed my sheep" – and yet even after Pentecost is going to get it totally wrong by refusing to eat with Gentile converts, and will be severely attacked by Paul for his hypocrisy and prejudice towards some of the sheep he has been called to feed. But this is also Peter who is redeemed; redeemed by his love and commitment to Christ, with an impulsive longing for the God who has called him and for whom he will ultimately offer all, plunging naked from his boat to follow the risen Christ to breakfast.

Those who follow Christ are not perfect people. If you think Peter makes mistakes then consider for a moment St Paul with whom he shares his Saint's Day. Talk about get it wrong! Ask Manuela what she thinks about some of Paul's views about women. The saints don't have a monopoly on righteousness. The Church is made up of those who have seen glimpses of Christ and longed for his kingdom. Real Christian inspiration thankfully is not about placing people on pedestals as an indictment to the rest, it's not about laws and rules and holiness codes, it is about the gift of love and thus redemption for real flesh and blood fallible human beings who need Christ. It is about the spirit of God within us lifting our eyes to glimpse in one another and in our world the eternal spirit of one who loves us all while we are still sinners. I don't want to belong to a Church which thinks it's got it all cut and dried, or a Church that thinks it's got a monopoly on Biblical interpretation, and the right to judge the souls of others. That right belongs only to God: a love which can lead through the conflict and out the other side as long as we hold onto it. That is the Church of Peter the fisherman and Paul the Pharisee who found Christ on the road, people who often got it wrong but loved a lot and went on loving and were saved by that love just as we can be too.

That's the inspiration... the divine face... glimpsing the face of Christ in one another. Let's look for the face of Christ in the Lambeth Conference. He may not be in the headlines, but he will be there somewhere, he always is. He may even wear a purple shirt, although I expect he would rather be sitting on the steps of St Martin's or dancing with in yesterday's Melanesian Festival or in churches throughout the country in broken bread and cups of tea feeding a broken but unique people. Look for him, look for Christ and we will find all the inspiration we need.