

Sunday 23 July 2006: The Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Breaking Down the Dividing Walls

Readings: Ephesians 2, 11-end; Mark 6 30-34; 53-end

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us. (Ephesians 2.14)

At the language school where I once taught on the south coast I remember meeting an Indonesian who was in the country to study English. He came to me to complain:

"I am not getting on well with my host family where I am staying and I want to be moved," he said. "Why?" I asked. "The woman, the mother does not like me- she looks down on me," he explained. "I'll give you an example: yesterday I wanted to eat an orange - only an orange and I take it and start to peel the skin away and she says to me 'No, not like that! In England we use plates, you need a plate.' And so I try to peel my orange on a plate and then she says to me: 'No not like that use a knife to cut the skin first. That's how we do it here!' And so I try to cut my orange with a knife on the plate and then she says: 'Look you are getting juice everywhere, use your napkin.' It's so hard to balance all these things and then she says to me 'Be careful you are getting the juice on the carpet now!' And so I take my orange into the garden to eat it there but she is still not happy and says to me: 'Here we eat at the table not in the garden.' And I can see in her eyes that she thinks I am a much uncivilised man because I can't even eat an orange in her way and I look at her and think she is a very uncivilised woman because she does not know how to enjoy an orange. Oranges are from my country!"

This is a small story I have remembered, a small parable of how differences divide and value judgements creep in. Here the differences were small and hopefully reconcilable but as we know it's not easy to reconcile when the prejudices continue.

A few weekends ago on a Saturday morning, Trafalgar Square was filled with a real sense of festivity. The Square was filled with a wonderful mix of English football fans still full of hope because England were about to play Portugal, and we still thought we might win the World Cup - fat chance! - and then mixing in with them thousands who have come in support of the Euro Pride, Gay Pride Carnival, with their colourful floats, costumes and dancing with huge placards proclaiming 'Love is a human right.' It was a dynamic mix and as I came out of 6 St Martin's Place I was admiring the energy, diversity and excitement of this great Square. And then suddenly someone started shouting at me "I suppose your Church agrees with this evil!" He had seen the rainbow flag flying from St Martin-in-the-Fields' mast in support and was full of fury. I stood there facing the swearing, his graphic descriptions of sexual acts and the violence of his assumed moral self righteousness which seemed to pay no attention to the young children who were listening to his rage. And finally I walked away, such violent prejudice seems impossible to counter.

Last year a group of black Melanesian Brothers from the South Pacific were with me in the UK on mission. They had heard stories about England for the whole of their lives: of its buildings and churches and cathedrals, its schools and universities and hospitals. This was the country of the first missionaries who had come to their country and begun the Church there. In this country they have been

welcomed with much warmth. And then walking along the road one day, a packed car drives past blaring its horn at us and winding down the windows they swear and stick up their fingers at the Melanesians. The Brothers wave back. “What did those signs they were making with their fingers mean?” they ask me. I am silent. How can you explain the lunacy that makes someone hate someone because of tribe or colour or nation or faith or sexuality? Perhaps it is simply better to wave back like the Brothers rather than let their poison poison us.

A play called *The Overwhelming* by J T Rogers is being performed at the National Theatre. It focuses on Rwanda just before the genocide began. The brilliance of the work is not simply in the way it portrays the tragedy of its subject matter but it creates the reality of the paranoia of conflict in which the audience get sucked into the fear; they lose the power of objective moral discernment for they no longer know which character is telling the truth, for all the characters believe their own truths and each truth is contradictory. And those we thought we could trust or wanted to trust are implicated and we fear they have been deceiving us. And our loyalties are torn apart. And in the state of powerlessness the dominant instinct is not a desire for justice nor even anger but fear. It is a fear which infects insidiously, that twists and distorts and undermines; a fear that your life is being threatened and you must survive at any cost: “I am sorry I keep looking over my shoulder before answering your questions. It is a habit we have here.” Joseph who is the Tutsi doctor who they are seeking to kill says: “For the rat there is no animal more dangerous than the cat. It is all he sees all he thinks of. Because the cat, he spends each day trying to kill the rat. For if he does not and the rats become more, who will be the hunter then? It is not hatred that drives them both it is fear. We are trapped in a cycle; prisoners of each other; prisoners of fear.”

I tell these stories in a week when things in the news don’t seem to add up. Yes there has been a heat wave but more than that perhaps many of us have been feeling deeply uneasy about what is taking place in the Middle East and the increasing humanitarian crisis in the Lebanon and the Gaza. Deeply uneasy about the relentless bombing and the pictures we have seen of a country devastated. Uneasy about seeing British warships rescuing British Passport holders but leaving the rest behind. There have been graphic images of children and civilians dying. From both sides we hear claim and counter claim, and in the meantime there are pictures of bleeding and weeping children and civilian corpses in burnt out vehicles and among the rubble. In the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury: “We are alarmed at the spiral of violence, the vicious circle of attack and retaliation, the principal victims: the innocent civilians on both sides of the border who now live in terror and are powerless to prevent the collective suffering. The *Three Faith’s Forum* which is a British organisation attempting to achieve dialogue between the three Abrahamic faiths said more bluntly:

“There is no future to be found in bullet, bomb or rocket, only blood and devastation.”

And as I prepare this sermon I can recall the words of Archbishop Romero, who also died in the struggle for peace, speaking out against death and violence in El Salvador:

“Those you kill are your own brothers and sisters. In the Name of God stop the killing.”

Or in the words of the comedian Lennie Henry, speaking about Africa for Comic Relief:

“These are your neighbours. This is your doorstep.”

When St Martin-in-the-Fields encourages an inclusiveness it is not simply being politically correct it is fundamental to the Gospel of love. Brother Roger of Taizé spoke about how God’s community is

“total” it does not allow for us to build frontiers and defences and prejudices for survival. It calls upon us to sit down side by side with difference and somehow from the source of the Spirit of God, defeat the fears which divide us. Neither is our Gospel preaching a narrow uniformity which fails to celebrate what Jonathan Sacks calls “the dignity of difference”. “The world is not a single machine” he writes, “it is a complex interactive ecology in which diversity - biological, personal, cultural and religious, is of the essence.” There is therefore difference but also life giving relationship. This is not a celebration of lukewarm Anglican compromise and relativity, it is a celebration of the miraculous life-giving diversity of our creation and of our God. For this is a God who reaches out across divide. Paul writes to the Ephesians that Christ has: ...broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two thus making peace and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross thus putting to death that hostility through it. These words need to be prayed more than ever. However great the horror, the place of suffering can become the place of transformation and reconciliation. That is the hope that Desmond Tutu is continuously proclaiming:

Goodness is stronger than evil
Love is stronger than hate
Light is stronger than darkness
Life is stronger than death
Victory is ours through the God who loves.

And look at the massive overcoming of prejudices that took place beginning with St Paul. We cannot underestimate how revolutionary the paradigm shift in understanding that happened. Jews and Gentiles shared nothing in common; they would not even eat together, or share anything in common, they would not enter under the same roof. This was a religious apartheid upon which their whole religious and cultural identity seemed to depend. And then suddenly God begins to reveal through St Paul and others like St Peter through his dream, a greater love and a greater truth: that God loves *all* his children. The theologian James Alison describes the change taking place: “We witness the dawning realisation that God likes the so called ‘impure’ people too and God wants them to be inside of God’s story just as they are.” God is not confronting them to repent, or condemning them, or forcing them to lose their culture or join a different tribe. He is not demanding that they be circumcised or follow a new set of laws in order to belong: “God is possessing them with delight and they are delighting in the being possessed. The holy Spirit is creating a new a new and impossible story in the midst of religious and cultural fixity - enabling them without losing who they are, to work out their new story *together*.”

And our Gospel story today is like a scene from that new creation. We see Christ burdened and overwhelmed and his disciples tired and hungry and yet continuing to reach out to all humanity; like the light he is pervading the darkness. He is surrounded by the crowd drawing them into the circle of his light in which they can find healing. We are told that Jesus had *compassion* on them. He is truly with them in their suffering and yet from that suffering mercy, not vengeance, is born. And those who surround him are touched by his presence. We are told that those who even touch his robes find healing. And is this not true f all of us? Have we not found the healing power of that inclusive love? It is a compassion born of vulnerability not of power.

It is only in this way that prejudices fall. You can’t bomb them away, or hate them away or bulldozer them. You have to risk trust; at some stage you have to risk life and relationship. Jesus put it very starkly: “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.”

Jean Vanier describes the transformation which can take place when prejudices end:

People begin to realise that to become fully human is not a question of following what everyone else does, of conforming to the predominating social values or being admired or honoured or powerful in a hierarchical society. It is to be free to let go of ones defences and inner fears, it is free to be more fully oneself, to follow ones deepest conscience, to seek truth, to love people as they are”

It is to discover that your neighbour, who you always feared is actually your means to freedom and to peace.

As a prisoner of war once wrote:

No one could tell me where my soul might be,
I sought for God but God eluded me,
I sought my brother and sister out and found all three
My soul, my God, and all humanity.