

Ecumenical Conference “Parables of Communion” - 20.10.16

29th Week in Ordinary Time

(Ephesians 3:14-21 / Luke 12:49-53)

When I arrived in Rostrevor the other night, I posted images of the brochure for our conference on my Facebook timeline. A friend commented soon after that the theme sounded quite ‘Taizé-like’. He was, of course, perfectly right. The title of our conference, *Parables of Communion*, echoes the words of the founder of the Community of Taizé, Brother Roger. His vision was an attractive and compelling one: ‘*I said to myself that it was essential to create a community where people search to understand one another and to be reconciled with one another always, and through this, to render visible a little parable of communion.*’ His successor as Prior of Taizé, Brother Alois, speaks of his community of brothers – from several denominations and thirty nationalities – wanting to be ‘*a little parable of [the] universality of God’s love*’. That word ‘parable’ again...

A parable is a story that illustrates a point or teaches a lesson. A parable is a story with human characters, rather than animals or fantasy creatures. A parable isn’t obscure or cryptic; rather it is something that communicates its meaning clearly and simply. Frère Roger’s wish was for his community to be a luminous exemplar of reconciled diversity, of peaceful and loving communion: a sign of unity for a world disfigured and scarred by war, hatred and sectarian hatred and fear. And, as Fr Mark-Ephrem put it last night, to be such a sign requires that the living witness of one’s life is the first word one speaks.

To be a parable of communion, therefore, is to be a sign; a sign that witnesses to possibility. Or, it might be more accurate to say, a sign that witnesses to destiny – what the theologians might call an eschatological sign. A parable of communion illustrates the truth that unity and fellowship are not pipe dreams... that they are not only possible; rather they are part of God’s plan. A parable of communion gives us a glimpse of the Kingdom. It is a sign of the in-breaking of the reign of God. It is a pledge of what God can do for our fractured world – complemented by our co-creative co-operation.

So, while the term *Parables of Communion* might remain forever associated in many people’s minds with Taizé, it describes very well what we are trying to explore over these few days together and what many of the people here have been trying to embody in their various communities, organisations and networks over many years: deepening mutual understanding, intensifying friendships in Christ, and signifying the bonds of communion in the Church.

What then, are we to make of today’s Gospel passage: ‘*Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division?...*’ Who would choose such a text for the liturgy at an ecumenical gathering?! The fact is, of course, that we didn’t choose it. It just happens, ironically, to be what the Lectionary for Mass prescribes for today. With this conference being so preoccupied with peace and unity, it would have been tempting – and I was tempted! – to ask the brothers here to change the reading to something less grating. But we stuck with it. The Second Vatican Council said of the presence of Christ in the liturgy: ‘*He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church.*’ [SC 7] So, we have to ask ourselves, what is Christ saying to us *today*? And that is not just a question of understanding the precise original meaning of the text, or of trying to understand the Greek or of using any other theological or scientific tools. Such tools can be of assistance, for sure, but they can also conveniently enable us to remain at a safe distance from

the text. When the words of Jesus seem harsh, or confusing, or if they give a picture of him that is not in accord with the image of him that we have constructed in our own image and likeness, we can be tempted to try to explain them away. But if we believe that Christ is present in his word, and is speaking to us through his word, then we must try harder and dig deeper, in order to discern what God is saying today - to us who have gathered here in Holy Cross Monastery to talk and think about parables of communion.

But it's a struggle.... The idea that Christ came to bring fire and division on earth is such a long way from the idea of *unum corpus* – one body – so dear to the Olivetan Benedictine tradition. It would be easy to become discouraged by the idea of Jesus coming to spread fire and division... to wonder if we're wasting our time... if working and praying for Christian unity is pointless... if division and discord, like the poor, we will always have with us and that's that. (Abbot Notker reminded us last evening, even the Apostle Paul's own community at Corinth was characterised by division and Fr John reminded us this morning of the jockeying over privileges described in *The Shepherd of Hermas*...)

It sounds almost perverse to hear the words *'I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already!'* on the lips of Jesus. Anyone who has ever seen news footage of forest fires knows just how devastating and dangerous it is when someone literally brings fire to the earth. And even though fire is spoken of in the Bible as a purifying, cleansing thing and as a manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit, in today's Gospel it appears alongside that shocking proclamation that Christ has come to bring not peace but division; and so it is hard not to see it in terms of destruction.

And of course, the oracle that accompanies this strange announcement has very clearly come true.... *'From now on a household of five will be divided; three against two and two against three* and so on. The proclamation of the Reign of God clearly did *not* result in peace breaking out all over the world two thousand years ago. That a journal like *'One in Christ'* needs to exist at all, and that a conference such as this needs to take place at all testifies to the sad reality that division is part of the condition even of those who profess to follow Christ.

And that is surely part of what Jesus is saying to us today. As Katherine reminded us this morning, God's Word isn't cosy or safe. It isn't a comfort blanket. It comes with 'vivid dangers'. If we take it seriously and are committed to following Christ, then something in our attitudes and relationships will inevitably change. Where there is change, there is often crisis – and division. In the last session, Katherine Meyer shared some words from Annie Dillard about her experiences of Sunday School scripture classes. I also have a favourite Annie Dillard quote! And I managed to dig it out in the few minutes between the end of the session and Mass time: *'The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.'*

God's word is challenging. It can require signal flares and crash helmets! But crisis is not always bad. Where there is friction, there is energy and where there is energy, there is possibility and potential – potential for development... for growth... potential for the Kingdom of God to break through. When we look at it like that, Jesus's promise to bring fire and division seems less like being condemned to chaos, disorientation and alienation, and more like a promise of renewal and – ironically – reconciliation. And so, far from falling on our knees and begging him to change his mind, we should be running out to greet him, asking to bring it on!

Jesus manifested this paradox of a division that ultimately brought renewal and reconciliation in his own body. Such was the challenge he posed and such was the division he sowed, that the authorities sentenced him to a criminal's death on a cross. As Simeon prophesied earlier in Luke's Gospel, he had been destined to *be a sign that will be opposed*. But great is the mystery of our faith! Through the paschal mystery that we celebrate in this and every Eucharist, that sign that was opposed... the stone that the builders rejected... became the cornerstone!

Cynics might scoff at Christians, and the apparent irony of our worshipping someone whom we call Prince of Peace, even though the apparent outcome of his ministry on earth was an incredibly violent and gory public execution. If they do, we would do well to give an account of the hope that is in us: On the Cross, the division engendered by Christ's life and ministry was offered to the Father, and transfigured and transformed into the reconciliation of the human race to God.

And so, to answer the question I posed earlier, what God is saying to us today is something like: 'Look to the Cross and take courage. I brought division, but I have overcome division. Be witnesses to divisions overcome, and to my victory. Be parables of communion.'

As we make that one all-sufficient sacrifice present in this celebration today, may we know not alienation and disorientation, but rather reconciliation and love. May it be, in the words of Father Prior yesterday evening, a blessed experience of communion. And may it make our hidden self grow strong, and empower us to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth of God's love; and knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, may we be filled with the utter fullness of God.