

Leader's Address
Dedication service 2008

CHRIST IS OUR PEACE – Ephesians 2: 14-18

And a subsidiary text from Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. In the novel Christ returns to earth on the eve of the Spanish Inquisition. He is arrested and confronted by the Grand Inquisitor who asks Christ the question: 'Why have you come to disturb us?'

Christ is at the point of intersection between humanity and God and at this point of intersection there is a supreme act of self-giving love. In this text he is at the point of intersection between Jew and Gentile and through the same act of self-giving love he breaks down the 'dividing wall of hostility' (v14) between them. This text has spoken eloquently in the Northern Irish context.

Reconciliation work can be understood as being at a point of intersection where there are 'walls' and hostility. The story of the Cornerstone Community, another community of reconciliation in Northern Ireland, illustrates this:

When the Cornerstone Community came into being twenty years ago, the choice of place to live was deliberate. The house is at the intersection of two communities in West Belfast, two communities then at war. Violence was rampant, people lived with grief, pain, fear and mistrust. A wall was being built to keep us apart. Cornerstone hoped to show there was another way of living. For the place of intersection is also the meeting point, and the function of a cornerstone is to unite the two intersecting parts, making both one (cf Eph 2: 20-22).

Twenty years on, we are still at the point of intersection. The physical wall is higher, but many encounters have taken place at the meeting point. We celebrate the fact that the community house has been a place of welcome where people have met across many divides. We celebrate the way our own lives have been enriched by encounters with visitors from across the world, each one a gift. We celebrate the generosity of the many volunteers who have come to us over the years, bringing their gifts of energy, enthusiasm, caring, practical faith. We celebrate republican ex-prisoners meeting with groups of English church people and tackling difficult questions together, and we celebrate people from different political persuasions using the house as a place to thrash out new political possibilities as part of the peace process. Above all, we celebrate our belief that Jesus Christ is himself the cornerstone.

Cornerstone's point of intersection was at a point of physical intersection between two opposing communities in West Belfast. Corrymeela's was the need for change in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, with a background of Ray Davey's experiences in the Second World War. But a point of intersection could be anything or anywhere where there are tension points, hurting places, vulnerability, silences, exclusion and division. It could be around gays, battered women, racial and ethnic minorities, refugees and asylum seekers, inter-faith relations, anything. And finding your point

of intersection involves attentiveness to what is going on; it means really 'seeing' and listening.

Reconciliation work faces the reality of pain and death and destruction and seeks to make visible new life. It breaks down walls of antagonised division and offers a new world – a new 'body' (v16). We engage in reconciliation work with confidence because Jesus has been there before, having endured the extremes of human hostility and lostness. As Archbishop Rowan Williams says, 'Our hope and our faith as Christians is that Jesus is Lord – that there is no situation in which he is irrelevant or impotent'.

Reconciliation work is about creating a trusted 'space' which brings people and things together to discover that change is possible – just as Christ in his breaking down the 'dividing wall of hostility' (v14) created a new space for a peaceful humanity.

Ephesians two is almost a hymn to the peace which Jesus brought about, to the possibility he creates for people. This is a peace based on a refusal to scapegoat – so it is not the peace that Herod and Pilate found (Luke 23: 12), the peace of the common enemy. It is a peace of being together in Christ (v16) – who was made a scapegoat by Jew and Gentile alike.

This is, therefore, not some soft and cosy peace, of happy consensus and quietness, of business as usual. Jesus comes as interruption; he brings worlds from elsewhere. He interrupts the comfortable worlds of the people who have arranged things to suit their convenience – who do not want to see their victims – with the worlds of judgement, truth and grief. This Jesus brings critical presence, disturbance and conflict. He also interrupts the worlds of exclusion and death with the worlds of healing, wholeness, life, joy and inclusion. And Jesus brings the challenge of new life and transformation to all.

Jesus refuses to belong – he is not at home with his world but is only at home with the Father. But he creates a home for others to belong to, his homelessness creates our home, a place for us to live. Christ's peace is given to us as we enter into and live in his world, as we enter into his 'space', the place of joy and grief, hope and judgement, truth and mercy, inclusion and narrow gates. In facing the world's tensions and challenges we receive Christ's peace and his Father's.

What does this peace look like? In the words of Rowan Williams again it is

A peace which is free, active, involvement, compassion, grateful receiving, generous offering, reciprocal enrichment. This is a peace Jesus creates between God and the world, because it is the kind of peace which exists between him and the Father.

To sum it up: a line from Anne Enright's Man Booker Prize winning novel, *The Gathering*, 'I give you a word and that word is love'.

This is not the peace of a truce which allows continued separation and business as usual but the peace of transformed relationships, of a new creation. And all of this is

deeply mysterious. It is not something we know about most of the time. Peace is mystery, it is walking into the unknown. To follow Christ is to go into this unknown. What is known, in Northern Ireland and other places, is violence, fear and division. As a Kosovan Serb said recently about the situation in Kosovo: 'Everyone expects violence, because it is the one constant here'. Peace is the unknown. And you are asked to create a shared and trusted space and a shared future with the person who was your enemy and who you may still have dark suspicions of. This is beyond the romantic 'poetics' of peace. This is the unsentimental prose of living together, the difficult journey that has to be made, the journey of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, into the way of peace (Luke 1: 79). May we all make the journey. Amen.

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