

LEADER'S ADDRESS
SERVICE OF DEDICATION
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Rather than a post-Christmas story I thought I would take a post-Resurrection story in the spirit of W.H. Auden's:

The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot after all, now be very far off.

I want to use this text in John to reflect on three important areas: the first is around failure; the second is about attentiveness; and the third is around hope. I believe it is around these 3 things that Christians can make a distinctive contribution to peace.

The text portrays a community of fear, failure and desertion, hiding behind locked doors. This is a community that has reached a dead end with no where else to go. They had hoped that Jesus was the person to set Israel free. And it had all gone wrong. Their religious and political stories had collapsed. And there is a deeper collapse shown here: the collapse of the myth that we can know history and know how things are going to turn out.

Christian hope cannot be about offering an easy option that things will simply carry on and that things will work out okay. There are real endings; for us personally, for us as a Corrymeela Community – which we have experienced over the last year – and for us as a society.

And a language of hope may paradoxically have to begin with an acknowledgement of failure and endings, and a language of grief. And many people may not want to hear anything about these things.

One of the big failures of this society is to find symbols and words that are adequate for the massiveness of the experience which people have gone through during the Troubles. There is a desire for a too easy moving on among some and a wallowing in competitive victimhood among others.

'And Jesus came and stood among them'

Jesus breaks into the world of fearful and failed people, and stands among them. Jesus appears in acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. On the far side of revenge - somebody who is entirely for us and not against us. Even though he has been transformed beyond death, Jesus still bears the marks of the crucifixion. The wounds make it clear that there is continuity between the crucified and the Risen Lord. The wounds tell the story of failure and complicity – whether active or passive – of people who were in various ways crucifiers. This is fundamentally our story. The memory remains in the wounds but it is a memory which has been woven into a new story in which the lie of violence has been exposed and in which reconciliation will have the final word. 'Shalom. Peace be with you'.

So failure, complicity and betrayal are recognised in this story – they are recognised in the wounds. There is no false innocence here. One of the real problems in Northern Ireland is that nobody appears to have been guilty of anything during the Troubles. This very comforting myth of innocence – perhaps necessary for a peace agreement – inhibits an honest reckoning which is necessary for the health of this society. There is no myth of victimised human innocence in the New Testament story. There is a real innocent victim, however, and he returns to save and heal the disciples, to save and heal us. 'Shalom. Peace be with you'.

To be a Christian is to know that we cannot live with goodness and truth for any sustainable period, is to know failure, and in fact it is to know that failure is normal – this is the knowledge of the wounds. And it is to know that there is something beyond failure – this is the knowledge of the Risen Christ who appears in the Upper Room.

Our involvement in peace and reconciliation work cannot start from a position of being good people who are going to do something good. It must start from a knowledge of being fragile, fractured and failed people who have been given the possibility of starting again. And this is truly liberating. It is what I think James Alison is getting at when he talks about the joy of not being required 'to get it right'. So this is the first thing that Christians can bring to peace work: a perspective on failure and that it is not the end.

The second thing I want to talk about is attentiveness. The great writer about attentiveness is Simone Weil. She was a French secular Jew who found Christ and died at 34 – she is one of the great writers of the 20th century. She is the patron saint of all outsiders and non-joiners. Although entranced by Christ she did not quite join the Catholic Church. She was a great favourite of Billy McAllister who was the presiding presence at the Corrymeela Centre for the first 10 years. So we can regard Simone Weil as an honorary Corrymeela person. She was a sort of practical mystic – deeply rooted in another world and yet with an urgent sense of responsibility for this.

One way of seeing the disciples' failure is as a failure of attentiveness. They were caught up in religious and political dreams, in a jockeying for position in the coming Kingdom, and so on. And when the really important moment came they failed to recognise it or grasp it because it did not come in the way they were expecting.

Contrast this with Jesus. Jesus was very clear that he was part of a society hurtling to disaster – he understood the signs of the times. He was attentive to people, and particularly in their distress – the woman who touches his garment in Mark 5 and to those who want the Kingdom on easy terms, e.g. the rich young ruler (which is most of us). And finally he was supremely attentive to God. Attentiveness is a form of prayer, to the deep down things, to the ground of being which is beyond all our feelings about things, which is God.

So I think Simone Weil points to the gift of attentiveness to what is going on. It is not a form of cleverness. Maybe it is a form of seeing out of the corner of the eye, the lucidity to see the shadow of the victim, a moment beyond rivalry and nonsense that we are all caught up in. It is a form of creativity, or the source of creativity. It is a knowledge that we can bring to peacemaking.

In the post September 11 world if we are to break the deadly cycle of escalating violence – of strike and counter strike, of atrocity and enraged reaction – we must start by paying attention to what everybody is saying, even our enemies and there are real enemies here, and be sincerely ready to let it change us: to get beyond rhetoric, decode the imagery, and hear the subtext of rage, grief, fear, pain, hatred and despair.

And the third thing I want to talk about is hope. Jim Wallis has said that the important thing that Christian can offer to those who are working for peace is hope. Peter Berger once called hope a 'signal of transcendence', an intrusion of God into our lives. This is in many ways an exhausted society and we are immunised against hoping too much. In such a situation there is an audacity to hope. At the heart of biblical faith is a series of images – Noah after the flood, Isaiah contemplating the destruction of Jerusalem, for instance – showing the unbroken human capacity to rebuild life after disaster. Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion – the reading of reality of the disciples in the Upper Room was the majority opinion. And Jesus stood among them and majority opinion was dethroned. A new alternative, transformed reality was set before them compelling them out of a room into a world with a limitless horizon. We are in the business of alternative realities – we have been since 1965. Hope is what this community must do

because it is God's community invited to be on God's pilgrimage to an alternative future. This is not about some happy piety that everything will turn out all right – that there will be no pain, hurt and failure – but trusting that we will ultimately be held.

And, of course, there is a fragility about hope. In the Northern Ireland painter Colin Middleton's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1948) Jacob's raised right hand is big and strong – symbolising the struggle with God. But there is also a delicate, fragile butterfly, signifying the angel/God figure. The butterfly symbolises resurrection and transformation. And transformation does not come without struggle, conflict and pain. In Middleton's picture Jacob's face is anguished and sad. And there are two 'sides' to his coat, one in bright positive colours and the other in dark colours, representing suffering.

There is the knowledge of the wounds – and Jesus came and stood among them and said 'Shalom – Peace be with you'. Amen.

David Stevens