

April 2014

A Memory of 'A Hard Line'

'Tenderness comes from long looking'

During the Lenten Season and in particular as we come into Passion and Holy Week we are often challenged by the 'ghosts of our past'. One such memory has surfaced for me, the following are my reflections:

Some years ago a shy young couple from a 'good Catholic family' in my parish asked to get married in church. I had never seen them at Mass and so I did not immediately agree to their request, and suggested further meetings. Maybe it was the tone of my voice, or maybe they were not very keen in the first place, but the outcome was that I never saw them again. I did hear some subsequent comments about the parish priest being 'a hard man'. Although long ago that still hurts. I deeply regret taking that stance. Even though the vast majority of the priests with whom I shared this moment wholeheartedly agreed with me, I now know, in my heart, that I was wrong.

In my travels since then, I have listened to a great number of bruised Catholics who find it difficult to understand the 'hard line' that so many of us priests and leaders in our church take, especially with regard to the reception of the sacraments. I remember attending a meeting for episcopal vicars in the nineties in London. Someone suggested a wider use of general absolution and a more generous attitude towards many of those no longer allowed to receive Holy Communion. 'Good God!' one of those present exclaimed, 'If we go down that road our churches will be crammed with sinners every Sunday morning!' As I reflect on this remark now I recall Pope Francis' words last October:



'.....In life it is difficult for everything to be clear, precise and outlined neatly, Life is complicated; it consists of grace and sin. He who does not sin is not human. We all make mistakes and we need to recognise our weakness. I would not really feel uncomfortable going to the periphery. You should not feel uncomfortable in reaching out to everyone.'

Many of us regret, like I do, the times that we have taken the tough option with fragile parishioners. To be sure, we do need some kind of guidelines so that our communities can stay in line with the vision of Jesus. And we do look for agreed diocesan policies and procedures about pastoral practice from time to time. But what the more experienced pastors will now freely admit – especially those who are in their later decades and who are risking the inner, spiritual journey into their own soul – is that they have stopped sticking to the party line when that line is less than compassionate, as echoed in Pope Francis' remarks. They regret the times they have placed restrictions on the unconditional love of God. They no longer shrink divine mercy to the size of their own timidity and fear. God's extravagant compassion reaches well beyond the boundaries and categories of prescribed behaviour, of our knowledge and certainties.

The bishops of England and Wales, at one of their meetings a some years ago in the north of England, admitted in their 'Lakes Meditation' that they were probably excluding from the Eucharist the very sinners to whom Jesus would have given pride of place. Am I right in thinking that much of the presentation of our faith in recent decades, the general tone of many Vatican curial documents, even the weekly thrust of many of our homilies and catechetical content, are still tinged, if not deeply coloured, by an attitude of admonition and caution? Goethe wrote;

'The dangers of life are many, and safety is one of them'

My abiding concern is about the loss of the reassuring invitation of a beckoning God, as revealed so unambiguously in the life of Jesus. Jesus was so good at simply walking with people without judging them, liberating people without making them dependent, forgiving people unconditionally while saving their embarrassment. He set out only to bless people with their own divine power. Above all, the delight of Our Saviour was as Emily Dickinson put it -

'to dwell in the potential of human beings'

This is what he was doing while relating to his disciples. He was clarifying for his faithful friends what they already half knew. He didn't berate them for their slowness, but because he loved them he was prepared to wait for their hearts to understand. Like all true teachers, he could recognise the butterfly in a caterpillar, the eagle in an egg and the saint in a sinful human being. And, as the sun coaxes open the petals of the daisy on a spring morning, so too the love of Jesus reached into the uncertain hearts of those who found themselves drawn to him.



There is a story about a flower that blooms only in the dark. Not only is this unexpected moment unseen; the aroma, too, is seemingly wasted in the night air. The light of God in our hearts is something similar – shining within our darkest night and our besetting sins. Not many are aware of this extraordinary, paradoxical epiphany. It was the way of Jesus to remember this divine truth and instead of condemning, blaming and judging, his gentleness touched every heart that lay open to him.



Knowing his own temptations and emotions, he understood those of others. Familiar, through contemplation, with the labyrinth of contradictions in his own soul, he saw accurately into the mysteries of the human heart. And, in the same manner, without enough silence in our own deepest selves, we 'people' of the church will continue to alienate people by too much projected control and too little graced trust. What the churches need to recover is the tenderness of Jesus. This only comes, as the poet Roethke said, 'from long looking'

We would do well to reflect on how patiently a mother entices out the humanity and the personality of her baby.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, theologian of beauty, wrote:

'After a mother has smiled for a long time at her child, the child will begin to smile back. She has awakened love in its heart, and in this awakening love, she awakens also recognition'

And Rilke said that an infant's journey into human awareness depended on the beckoning, beguiling voice of the mother, easing the child into selfhood, lessening the shadows of the abyss that trap us in inarticulate darkness. You could hardly say, in light of this reality, that the mother takes 'the hard line' with her baby. Yet Mother Church with her children, too often does!

To return to my opening confession of tough pastoral practice, I hardly encountered that young and loving couple as a mother would her baby. I do not think it makes me soft or sentimental to hold that, as heralds of the gospel, lay and clerical, we now need to recover that mother tongue, that coaxing, patient and captivating presence with which our own mothers, and before that Jesus, made us aware of our own amazing mystery.

We live in a terrifying world. There is so much fear and darkness all around us. Too often we feel small and powerless. In our heart of hearts, when we are alone at night, when we let down the masks, the front, the brave smile, what we long for is not the precise language of official church-speak. We yearn for the tenderness that comes from long looking, for the warmth, the loving eyes and the open arms of our mother. As anyone who is familiar with the emotions of those who feel alienated in hospices, neglected in residential homes and frightened in our hospitals knows, what we all want, at the end of the day, is to be welcomed home.