

Presentation of Cross of Nails to the Anglican Communion Office St Andrew's House, London. 29th February 2008

Jesus asked the man at the pool of Bethesda “*Do you want to become whole?*” After 38 years of living as you do now, thinking as you do now and behaving as you do now, do you want to be changed? Not such an odd question. As Emily Dickenson reminds us even ‘*a prison gets to be a friend*’. As members of a fracturing family, it is surely a crucial question for us today. Do we actually want to be changed or have we become settled, established, even hardened, in who we think we are and the positions that we hold?. As Ignatius of Antioch reminds us, “*Keep your hearts soft and tractable lest you lose the imprint of His love.*”

Elias Jabbour, a Maronite Christian living near Carmel, told me how his heart had become hardened, embittered even, when Israelis took from him and his family the extensive lands they had owned for generations. He was visiting Coventry some years ago and, standing in the ruins of the Cathedral, he saw the charred wooden cross from the roof of the bombed Cathedral and the words “*Father Forgive*” underneath. God spoke to him deeply through this. His heart was softened. (“*I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*”) He set up the House of Hope, a place of encounter, dialogue and co-operation between Christians, Jews and Muslims. He now has a particular ministry of reconciliation with the Druze community. This is the ministry of crossing of boundaries in Jesus’ name. The root of the word Paul uses for reconciliation, *katallagein*, is *allos*, “*the other*”. *Katallagein* has the sense of changing places with the other, moving across boundaries to be where the other is. This, of course, is very much of Christ “*who bore our sins in His body on the tree.*” As we are reminded by the Orthodox, *He became as we are that we might become as He is.*

Two days ago I was in the Cathedral with Serbs and Croats from Vukovar. It was a harrowing meeting. Lots of tears were wept as people told their stories: fathers, husbands, sons, brothers being interrogated, being shot, being kidnapped and never seen again. Both Serbs and Croats had dreadful stories to tell. Real, deep, still bleeding wounds being opened up to the other and to God.

I think of a recent gathering of CCN centres in Israel/Palestine at Tantur (itself a CCN centre) where the centres for reconciliation from very different contexts came together for the first time. Most of the centres were engaged and rooted in strongly Palestinian contexts. One, however, was/is a centre for Jewish Christian theological dialogue in Jerusalem. We gathered to make space together for God and one another. Dreadful experiences were shared by those on both sides of the wall both including by a victim of a suicide bomb.

Well, what about us? Which of us can truly say we do not need to be made whole or that we have no need of reconciliation in our personal, family, local or church lives? And what about us as the family of the Anglican Communion? When Tertullian wrote, “*see how these Christians love one another*”, he meant it! Now it is only said with heavy irony. What is this doing to our witness to the world which God so loves? “*Father Forgive.*”

A few days ago I saw a small child dancing down the aisle of the Cathedral with spontaneous joy and abandon “*For freedom Christ has set us free.*” “*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.*” Paul writes of “*the glorious liberty of the Children of God.*” We read in Psalm 18 v.19: “*He brought me out into a spacious place; he delivered me because he delighted in me.*”

Croats and Serbs were telling me on Wednesday of the months they had to spend confined in dark basements being bombarded, literally hundreds of bombs falling on and around them each day.

The root of the Hebrew word for salvation, *yasha*, *yeshua*, *yoshuah* can mean *make spacious*. It is the image of deliverance from confinement, deliverance from imprisonment, being set free.

Coventry Cathedral, the home of the Cross of Nails, is a spacious place not simply architecturally, but more importantly in that it reflects the spaciousness of God's love, a love so radical and revolutionary that it embraces not simply the alien or stranger – the one who is different - but even the enemy. In his national Christmas broadcast six weeks after the bombing of Coventry and the Cathedral, Provost Howard said, "*We must not seek revenge, we must seek to build a more Christ child-like world*". The inspiration of our truly international or *oikumenical* Cathedral is the God who in Christ "*has broken down the dividing walls*" and who brings us peace. We worship the living God, creator and redeemer who in His love and in His grace makes space for us. The Old Testament scholar, Westermann, reminds us that creation involves first of all *separation*. God separates light from darkness, waters above from waters below, waters from the dry land. These separations are to make *space* for God's creatures: first space for plants and vegetation: then space for fish and birds: and space for animals; and, finally, space for human beings to whom He entrusts stewardship of His creation. In creation God makes space for us to enjoy communion/right relationship with Him, with one another and with His creation. If creation is about God, in His love, giving us that space and freedom to love and be loved so is salvation. As Paul writes, "*In Christ our sins are forgiven and our release is secured. Jesus, the Saviour comes to release us.*"

As Miroslav Volf, the Croatian American, writes, "*On the cross, God renews the covenant by making space for humanity in God's very self.*" "*Space for humanity in God's very self.*" Paul's preferred and most frequent description of Christian identity is "*in Christ*". He uses this phrase 55 times in his letters. We are baptised into Christ, into His death and resurrection. Our life is lived in Christ and in Christ the divisions are healed, dividing walls are broken down, but differences remain. Indeed they are an essential mark of our corporate life. Paul was clear: Gentile Christ followers do not need to practise Jewish customs; Jewish Christ followers do not need to jettison their Jewish practises. The strong must honour the weak, those who do not observe certain feasts and certain diets must honour those who do and vice versa. In the body of Christ, neither freedom nor knowledge can override the priority of *agape*, self-sacrificing love, the love that puts the other first. This, for Paul, is the guiding principle of our life in Christ.

One of the most challenging and inspiring times I spent was living for the best part of a year with Christians from every continent, from many African and Asian countries, from Eastern Europe (then behind the Iron Curtain). Amongst us we spoke 60 languages. In the midst of inevitable misunderstandings and sharply different cultural perspectives, there were moments of the breaking in of God's glory, of Pentecost, where we enjoyed the unity of the Spirit in our glorious diversity. There is, surely, no room for Christian tribalism or imperialism.

Nancy Mitford, one of our British writers in the 30s, coined the phrase "PLU". This stood for "*people like us*". People like us, not people like them. There is and always has been a danger within the body of Christ to set up camps. I belong to Paul. I belong to Apollos. I belong to Kephass. Following from this, there is the danger of seeking to convert others to us. All our prayer, our witness and our ministry is surely not to convert others to us, but that all of us may be more fully converted, handed over to Christ.

Dorotheus of Gaza, one of the Desert Fathers, reflecting on Christian unity, used the image of a circle with God at the centre of the circle and Christians at different places, in different positions around the edge of the circle. He showed that Christian unity can never be discovered simply by looking across from our positions or bunkers to each other and trying to persuade others to become like us. It can only be discovered when each of us, from our different perspectives, are focussed on God in Christ and the closer we come in our journey into the fullness of God's love, the closer we will come to one another.

The Cross of Nails reminds us that *while we were sinners Christ died for us*, that each of us is accepted by God in Christ, even though unacceptable. We who are in Christ are called to accept the unacceptable and not ask that they be acceptable before we accept them. As Paul wrote, conscious of the diverse backgrounds of Christians in Rome, '*Accept one another, therefore as Christ has accepted you.*' Rom. 15.7

As Christians, our life in Christ is lived in the space won for us through the life death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a space we occupy only through grace. As ministers of reconciliation we are called to offer that space in which others may also find freedom. As those who are discovering more and more of the height, the depth, the breadth, the length of God's love, we are called to be spacious people, people with room for the other, the stranger, even the enemy. As Paul wrote to the Christ-followers in Corinth, including his fierce critics, *'Open wide your hearts to us as we have opened wide our hearts to you.'* (Cor.6.11-13)

This, of course, is not to say that anything goes. As has been said, ethical lines do have to be drawn. It is, however, a plea for generous hearts for those who differ. John Wesley revealed something of this when he wrote, late in his ministry, *'I have put on a more catholic spirit finding tenderness for those who differ from me in opinions or in modes of worship.'*

Let us pray for grace to give to others the space that God has, in Christ, given to us.

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