

Social Responsibility Network Annual Conference
Conflict Transformation – Process and Practice
Biblical Reflection on
Incarnation through Reconciliation to bring Transformation
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Welcome

It is a pleasure to be able to join you for part of your conference here in Belfast and thank you for your warm welcome yesterday evening. I hope that you have felt very welcome in our midst. It is good to have you here, not just because we are happy to see people are coming to this once apparently God-forsaken place, but because visitors and fellow pilgrims can help us to reflect on who we are and how we have come to be where we are. We may have something to offer visitors, but we have much to learn. We are so close to who we are and what our history has been. As Duncan indicated last night, this conflict has been so much part of our psyche for centuries that our institutions and intuitions are so firmly entwined with it that it is hard to imagine and create a different future. So we are enriched by fraternal visits that help us to see real questions that we instinctively shy away from. We may be victims of our past but we are also the architects of it. You can help us see ourselves in another light and through eyes that search and see with faith. In the Gospel search for truth, it is always better to be unhappy with the right questions than happy with the wrong answers.

Hope

It is good to see that you have chosen a hotel with an address in Hope Street. We need a lot of hope streets, not just in Belfast and Liverpool but around the globe. John Paul Sartre's experience of *nausée* and boredom is an increasingly global experience. In 2003 Pope John Paul II wrote a letter on the 'Church in Europe'. The chapter titles were simple and reflective of a deep need in Europe.

1. Jesus Christ is our Hope
2. The Gospel of Hope entrusted to the Church in the new Millennium – a call to conversion and mission
3. Proclaiming the Gospel of Hope – a call to be witnesses as preachers, reconcilers who seek to touch the heart of society
4. Celebrating the Gospel of Hope – as communities of prayer and liturgy
5. Serving the Gospel of Love – the mission of service
6. The Gospel of Hope for a New Europe – building a commitment to a new Europe that will promote universal values.

Hope is in short supply. Here many people can find it had to re-imagine NI. And the stories that we tell about the past limit our perspectives about what the future could be like. But it is not just NI that needs hope. In an age of widespread social fragmentation and where self-righteous anger is often seen as a virtue, where victimhood and a sense of being hard done offer podiums for a sort of often secular piety, where there is a widespread disillusionment with the major institutions and icons of society, where the best we can hope for is a win in the National Lottery, the Church has a huge

opportunity to generate hope, and to incarnate the Gospel values in how we live and treat one another.

The Biblical Worldview – at the edge.

This is a radical message. We know that from the Beatitudes that proclaim a really upside-down Kingdom. A Christianity that fails to emphasise the radical nature of God's Incarnation in Jesus and the consequent radical call to allow grace to take flesh and dwell among us, that religion will be a source of escapism and fail to be transformative. From the Mesopotamian creation myths of Marduk and Tiamat right through to many of the world's great religions, the Judaeo-Christian tradition is unique in its revelation of God's transforming vision for humankind. We are all made in God's image and likeness (Gen.1:26-27) and despite sin, God still loved and loves the world so much (Jn. 3:16-7). Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save it. Because of his death and resurrection, our bodies and our communities are temples of God's Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16 and Rom. 8:9), and because of that they will be raised up on the Last Day. (Rom. 8:11). That religious *Weltanschauung* sees history, not trapped in a Greek cyclical world, but moving forward towards a day when the new heaven and the new earth will be revealed. (Rev.21:1). That is the mystery the plan that God had from all eternity in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3:11), that He would bring everything together under Christ, everything in heaven and everything earth (Eph. 1:10). That is the mystery, things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard that God has now revealed to us through the Spirit. (1 Cor. 2:10). It is a mystery of God Emmanuel in solidarity with a fallen human race, never absorbed or overcome by the world but never abandoning it, loving us while we were and are still sinners. (Rom. 5:8) That is a radical solidarity of God with us.

Your invitation was for me to me to reflect on the need for openness to God's grace and Spirit, if we are to have a transformation of the human condition, rather than just the re-ordering of the social furniture. That is a reflection that you have already made over the years. In your network you are coming with a very clearly articulated commitment to the incarnation of Church in society. You have a clear commitment to building community and working for social justice and to the revelation of God through the unexpected, the marginalized and the social context. You are very clear that the social and holistic welfare of people is not separated from the proclamation of the Gospel. You are clear that the scriptural revelation about our dignity and destiny are central if communities are to realise and experience their full potential. That is a message that we need to hear here as well.

Yes, this is all God's work "If anyone wants to boast, let them boast about the Lord." (1 Cor 1:30-31) But in the context of transformation, Church vision and leadership are vitally important. The heart of leadership is about the heart of the leaders. That is where the openness to the Spirit has to be abundantly clear. Of course leaders are not just those in formal leadership positions, but all those who offer a sense of direction, a creative vocabulary, a testimony to new possibilities. There you are leaders. That is where the implications of the Incarnation start for us. We are called to bring hearts moulded by the Spirit and by Christian hope - which does not disappoint (Rom 5:5) as

distinct from deceitful daydreaming - to the current *kairos*, whether in Belfast, Birmingham or Bermondsey. Such a moulding of the heart is rarely an easy task. Indeed it is often painful for we all come identified but also often burdened by our own stories. But the place is here, the time is now – we do not choose when and where to be Christians! The signs of the Kingdom have to take flesh here and now. Only with this openness of heart can we hope to be used in the building God's Kingdom. All example of leadership in the NT are about transformation on the way to the new heavens and the new earth. (2 Peter 3:13) They give little support to a policy of conservation. Growth takes pace near the edge. It is often a painful place to be – but it is the place where Jesus went, whether in Bethlehem, Egypt, the lepers, the Samaritan town or Calvary. Jesus was declared to be the Prophet and we all know where prophets were to be found. Ask Jeremiah down the well, Ezekiel with his bundle, or the others like Micaiah son of Imlah (1 Kgs 22). And to be able to wait at the edge with trust in God's ways, that needs a deep spirituality and a heart moulded by prayer. It seems to me that there is no other way.

Deceptive security

The edge is a risky place and we are conscious of being at the edge of society. Paul's insecurity at he approached Corinth is a good example of how that human weakness, that fear and trembling, (1 Cor 2:3) can allow God's work to take place. In a time of comparative powerlessness one of the temptations for religious – and not so religious – the temptation for some people is to seek solace in a spirituality that emphasises withdrawal from the world, rather than a solidarity in Jesus with the world. We have seen an abundance of small groupings, which seek complete certainty from which nothing will budge them. We have such groups and tendencies here, too, and we find them in both the church and secular spheres. However, the NT message calls us to act in trust rather than in certainty, for we are always invited to let God shock us. It is a message that is centred on the scandal of the Incarnation – and the struggle to accept the Word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with us, born of a woman, born subject the Law (Gal 4:4) has continued through Christian history. Immediately after his Baptism, Jesus was tempted to be content with simplistic, reassuring short-term ways to be the Messiah. Incarnation means engaging with the pain and fragility of the world that God loved so much that he sent his only Son (Jn 3:16). For Jesus it meant engaging with the Samaritan woman, the leper, Zacchaeus and the cross. Just as Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Amos had to make space for grace in the politics and business worlds of their day, and Paul argued on the Aeropagus (AA 17: 23-34) and with the silversmiths in Ephesus (AA 19: 23-41), we have to engage with the reality of war, exploitation, sectarianism and political horse-trading. Witnessing to the Good News is no simple business. The role of the prophet was both antithetical – standing out against the values of the time - and confident to dialogue. We have no choice in when we are called upon to proclaim it where people are. And the harder the circumstances, the more the transforming grace of Jesus is needed! The Good News has to be proclaimed to all creation. Escapism is not part of the Gospel.

Weakness

However, though that mission may give us energy, whatever we do we do it as individuals and as Churches, we are all too aware that we are earthenware vessels

holding a treasure (2 Cor 4:7). That applies to individuals and to church structures. Of course, the mystery of God's love is that the incarnate God works through frail humans and a church that is still marked by the sin of Adam. We have nothing to boast about except the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. God loved us while we were still sinners. (Rom 5:8) For that reason, we can are not scandalised when the churches are shown up as being less than perfect. We are still on the Exodus march out of slavery. After all, it is Christ alone who is "our wisdom, our virtue our holiness and our freedom" (1 Cor 1:30).

And our weakness and sin are constant reminders to us not to be proud of what we do or have done. The struggle against the power of sin and death has been fought since Adam and Eve. It is not a human struggle. It is a work of God's grace that will heal those who are bitter or hurt, or who find it very hard to trust or believe in the future. It is a revelation of God's love that will heal those who find it very hard to believe in a God who believes in them because of failure or guilt.

Repentance

And if a core message of the NT is the mission to preach with confidence in the Spirit, the broader message of the OT and NT contains another important refrain. That points to the reality that God's people have constantly gone astray and need to be humbled, brought back to God's ways. While we can lament the weakness of Church today, and react at our detractors, we also need to start with the first words that Jesus speaks in Matthew's Gospel "Repent" (Mt 4:17) When Shimei cursed David as he fled Jerusalem during Absalom's rebellion, the king accepted the rebuke for this may have been God's way to humble him (cf 2 Sam 16:5-14). Only a church that knows ongoing repentance and the Lord's transforming forgiveness is entitled to preach it. That liberating transforming repentance lies at the heart of the Easter experience for Peter, Thomas and the other disciples. God works through those who let themselves be remade by the potter (cf Jer 18), rather than by those who consider themselves invaluable Ming vases.

And where do we need to operate with a humbled, contrite heart (Ps 50/51:17), and with confidence? In Northern Ireland, we have to live with the reality of a divided society. We can assert, quite correctly, that the conflict is mainly political rather than religious. This is not primarily a religious conflict – and the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement of 1998 was based on the unambiguous assumption that our problem is whether we feel ourselves Irish or British here. So, deep down, we can claim that the blatant sectarian confrontations are not our core problem. But it is clear that the potential for sectarianism is close to the surface in any divided society, and that that potential can be readily encouraged and exploited by all sorts of power blocs – some in baseball caps, some in pinstriped suits, and some in clerical garb. The secondary tumour of naked sectarianism is a symptom of confused allegiances, rather than the primary illness. But, if want to see the world through the eyes of the Creator and the redeemer, we know that we cannot be satisfied with being comfortably divided, and moan about politicians and structures. We know that 'systemic sectarianism' affects us all in different ways. And that needs repentance and active work. The Gospel has to be allowed to take flesh and dwell among us.

Reconciliation imperative

Of course, we know that local church communities cannot engineer major ecumenical breakthroughs. But ecumenism should not be confused with community relations. Can people of faith say that a prime priority for all Christian communities here is the building up of confidence and trust? Are we known for positive, energising gestures to lower tension and bear witness to Christian love? Are we working to lower barriers or just waiting for politicians or the grace of God to work miracles? Are we a prophetic voice that examines the causes of conflict *and* seeks to remove them? Or are we happy just to be conscious of our weaknesses and blame others? I can only answer 'sometimes' to all of these questions. After all, being in positions of power and close to the levers of power can be a hindrance, rather than a help, when we are needed to play a prophetic role. Within the nationalist community, the Church provided a strong force for building a state within a state. But that leadership role and that need to be chaplain and spokesperson have hidden major possible seductions. But while powerlessness may rarely be pleasant it is not always a bad thing in the service of the Gospel.

Unfortunately, I am afraid that it is precisely many of our church communities – for whatever understandable reasons - that are lacking in enthusiasm or even downright hostile when it comes to the breaking down some of our barriers, and reconciling us with God. (cf Eph 2:16-17) While we may know where people are coming from, our role as Church leaders cannot allow us to shrug our shoulders and say that people aren't yet ready to go forward too quickly. We seek to work for a society where politics are moulded by Christian values. That means understanding justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and love on God's terms. We may often have allowed our understanding of these terms to be moulded by political values and perspectives. For generations, there was the assumption that to be Irish and to be Catholic were more or less synonymous. Others assumed that the fight for God and for Ulster were inextricably linked. That was taking the Incarnation much too far.

Now, I believe that churches here do deserve much credit for their involvement in building social cohesion and developing community projects. Indeed, they have hung in there with communities when others didn't. Church leaders and personnel were conspicuous in their readiness to dialogue, make public statements and attend funerals when politicians were not ready to speak. They provided a forum for contact when others dreamt only of victory. And now they are often excluded from public funding for some projects because they are accused of just wanting to proselytise. That work should never be underestimated, however much the new ideology might want to sideline us and reinterpret history. I understand, too, that church people are very stretched in their dedication to serving their communities. But we also have to stop and ask an important question. Are we busy doing good things, or are we busy doing what we believe the Lord has called us to be doing? Busyness doing good things can get in the way of seeking the Lord's priorities. As Christian bodies, we need to be constantly examining our projects in the light of the NT. If we are too busy to prioritise reconciliation, are we too busy? If we are busy but not really engaging with the half of the population that is under c.30, have we failed to transform ourselves? Only a transformed people can be agents of transformation.

And what is the big picture coming from the Biblical perspective here? It seems to be that there are a couple of key imperatives in an incarnational if we are to offer the possibility of transformation – and Duncan alluded to these last night. On the nationalist side, as churches we have to ensure that we fight the default position of many centuries – we are victims of perfidious Albion who stole our land and of their local henchmen. The victim is only defending him or herself. They should not be blamed for their actions. They were forced upon them. Thus paramilitary prisoners should not be treated as common criminals and the Church had no right to condemn acts that were solely for the purpose of fighting oppression. But the victim can quickly transform into the bully, for the victim really only knows the language of oppressor/oppressed, defeat/victory, pain/ revenge. On the unionist side, there was a perceived sense of superiority – cultural, economic, social and theological. That has to be talked about and confronted, without promoting what has already, viz. a sense of unionist victimhood and a desire to keep themselves pure from the threatening hordes. That is where our incarnation of Christ's grace needs to be visible so that we don't just keep interchanging our victim/ oppressor roles but make no progress. The Johannine semeia, the signs of the Kingdom have to be visible here as well.

Of course, we have to be wise enough to even question the vocabulary that is used about reconciliation. We can spend out whole time looking at the need for 'denominational' reconciliation. And that is clearly a major element. But we also have the huge and perhaps growing phenomenon of social sectarianism. In many areas increasing number of Protestants and Catholics, nationalist and unionists have no problem playing golf, squash etc together – but they would not be seen dead letting their children go to school with children from ghetto areas. I understand where they are coming from and all parents want the best for their children. But we have to at least acknowledge the growing gulf between the haves and the have-nots and say that this cannot be acceptable in a Christian community. Benign apartheid does not work in the social or the denominational sphere. We also have to come to terms with the reality of increasing non-native populations. Our welcome to them has been uneven or indeed rough at times. Reconciliation is about more than churches meeting over cups of tea, or about them being used to support what is the PC agenda at a particular time.

I have great confidence that God is working away, even when the fig tree does not blossom and the stalls stand empty of cattle (cf Hab 3:17). We know that many people in this fragile world of many fickle relationships still want to be able to believe in the possibility of love, faithfulness, forgiveness, reconciliation and community. We need to recognise that the western secular vision of tolerance can often be a bland cover for unquestioning conformism, that a blinkered version of a human rights culture can exalt the individual but destroy the community which supports us as social beings. We know from writers like Mary Douglas that ideas are often the creation of social behaviour rather the other way round, for structure and culture provide the vocabulary and the lens through which we process and interpret our experiences. And there is some element of truth in the Marxist dictum that the ideology of any society is the ideology of the ruling class. But I think that it was Viktor Frankl who insisted that meaning rather than freedom was the greatest human need. Liberté and égalité without fraternité will destroy rather than transform and will not witness to the values of the Gospel. God's

wisdom may yet be shown to be greater than that of the John Lennon who imagined a world with no religion too. However, much research has suggested that

- people who pray live longer and have lower levels of stress;
- shared vision and language empowers people;
- faith based education produces better cognitive and social outcomes;
- 'spiritual' intelligence is at the core of growth and sanity;
- there is a need for a rich symbolic vocabulary to process the liminal aspects of life.

The Gospel can respond to all these deepest human needs which are evident in much of our current myopic society. And people still yearn for hope that does not deceive. We are called to bear witness to the incarnate grace of God which takes so many forms. That grace was visible in strength through the miracles of Jesus and the power of his resurrection. But that wisdom was also revealed in Bethlehem and on Calvary. Failure and success are very relative terms when we can see only with human eyes.

Despite the superficial belief that all God language was childish and meaningless, we have come to recognise that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom (1 Cor 1:25), that unbridled consumption will transform little more than our waistlines. It clogs the heart in more ways than one. This is a good time to be a believer in NI. The old mould has been broken and the future lies open to being moulded again with Gospel values. Hope is not just a theological virtue. It is also a creative virtue. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!