

Dare to be different: Be Peacemakers.

The translation used has mainly been The Revised English Bible-

Introduction: Due to health problems I am unable to be present with the Fellowship of the Kingdom next May, but I have agreed to prepare this little study paper based on my earlier contribution to the IBRA Bible Reading Notes 'Words for Today'. As a member of the Corrymeela Community since its foundation in 1965 and Leader of the Community for 13 years from 1979-93, I have been involved in a very specific ministry of Peacemaking, with special reference to Northern Ireland, for most of my ministry. Although our agenda in 1965 was global in its vision, the call to be peacemakers in our local situation was at the centre of our vocation.

Surprisingly, many Christians in Ireland saw little connection between peacemaking and the gospel. The priority was personal salvation. The passages for our reflection this week show that this was a serious omission. Much of Jesus' teaching deals with situations of conflict and violence, the tasks of peacemaking and the building of community. In a world where mobility and communication has brought people of different races, classes and cultures into closer proximity the major question facing us all is 'how can we live together in peace?'

I hope that our experience has helped us to see the relevance of the gospel to the tasks of peacemaking, not only in Northern Ireland but throughout the world at large. Since the events of 11 September in America the fragile state of has been brought home to us all. Peacemaking is not an optional extra for any of us.

1. Luke 6: 27-31 Breaking the cycles of violence:

This passage has sometimes been interpreted in a moralistic way as an almost impossible new law.

It has also been understood as a purely passive response in the face of violence and oppression. Recent commentators like Walter Wink in his book 'Engaging the Powers', have put the passage into context. He suggests that the call to turn the left cheek after we have been struck on the right was a non-violent challenge to the oppressor to treat you as an equal rather than as an inferior. The reason given is that a slap on the right cheek can only be given with the back of the hand and is therefore a 'put down' gesture but when the other cheek is turned he or she can only strike you with the front of the hand, ie as an equal, if they wish to continue the violence. (see also Matthew 5: 39)

Perhaps the most important insight is that if we simply react in kind, in a tit for tat fashion, we get caught up in a cycle

of violence and we allow the oppressor to determine our behaviour; in other words we lose our freedom! If we can refrain from that gut reaction and do something different or unexpected we can sometimes break the cycle. There are of course no guarantees so we have to be prepared to suffer. It is in our vulnerability that we point to a reality beyond ourselves, ie God, in whom we place our ultimate trust. When Gordon Wilson lost his daughter in a bomb blast at Enniskillen he said that he bore no ill will towards her killers. The leader of a paramilitary group said later that these words made it impossible for him to order his men to carry out a revenge killing.

Question 1.

Can we imagine for a moment how an opponent might be 'disarmed' by an unexpected gesture? (eg President Sadat of Egypt, going to speak to The Knesset in Israel)

Question 2.

Think of a concrete situation in your experience? Do Paul's words about 'heaping coals of fire on his head' strike a chord for you as a way of overcoming evil with good?

Prayer Lord, in the face of violence, hatred and oppression give us calmness, courage and clarity. Free us from bitterness and fear so that we may witness to your truth in the power of your love. Amen.

2. Luke 6: 32-36 Follow the model of God's indiscriminate and inclusive love.

In commenting on this passage I want to hold it together with a similar passage in Matthew. In verse 36 we are urged to be compassionate even as our Father in Heaven is compassionate and in the Matthew version of the same saying (chapter 5:48) the Greek word 'teleios' is used and is often translated as 'perfect'. Another possible translation of the word 'teleios' is 'indiscriminate' or 'all inclusive', meaning that our love is to be without limits.. Often our love is exclusive; we love those who love us or give to others only when we are certain of a return. But any loving parent knows that this is not authentic love. We know that even when things have gone wrong or when our son or daughter have turned their back on us, we cannot cease to care for them, in spite of everything, and to seek their welfare. When we discover that God loves us in spite of our selfishness, dishonesty, prejudices etc we are given a new dynamic power to show the same generous indiscriminate love to others and to reach across the barriers of hate, alienation and division.

In our work with young adults in Corrymeela we sometimes find that they wish to test us out to see if our love is authentic.

Their past experience may have made them feel that most expressions of love are phoney, so they may even betray a trust to see if they will be rejected!!

Question 1.

How do we respond when our love and care is thrown back in our face? Think of situations when that has happened to you?

Question 2.

What is the difference between sentimentality and love?

Prayer:

Lord, we are often afraid of the cost of love; when we are hurt we often close up like clams.

Help us to risk being vulnerable and generous for your sake and so to know better 'the breadth and length, the depth and height of your love' Amen.

3. Luke 6; 37-42 Getting beyond blame:

Those of us who live in divided societies are well aware of the culture of blame and counter blame which infects the climate of our lives. In Northern Ireland it is often called 'what aboutery?'. Each time one community blames the other for a particular injustice the other immediately responds with the words 'what about the time when.....?' referring to a previous incident which gave an excuse for their actions.

It is so easy to keep the score of each others' wrongs and to judge the actions of our rivals harshly, but the followers of Christ are called to look first at ourselves and to begin with a self critique of our own group, or church or community. Jesus' words about the 'speck' and the 'plank' help us to laugh at our capacity for self-deception. It is very easy for all of us to look for scapegoats as the source of all our troubles; blaming others and asking only them to change often means that we have to do nothing!! If we take the initiative in self-examination and repentance, acknowledging our own blindness, we often get a surprising response from our enemy or protagonist.

Question 1.

Think of some of the scapegoats that you are tempted to use in order to avoid any personal responsibility for the problems of your society? eg Is'nt it a bit too easy for us in Ireland to blame the paramilitaries, or the British or Dublin governments for all our troubles?

Question 2.

Where does responsibility lie in your situation?

Prayer

We confess how often we are blind, how rash our judgements and how self-righteous our attitudes can be. Shine you light on our lives and our communities and transform us with your truth and love. Peace will come; let it begin with me.

Amen.

4. Luke 6: 43-49 (a) Authentic living bears fruit:

In some Evangelical circles there is a very dangerous distortion of the reformation doctrine 'justification by faith'. This stresses that good works are of no significance in salvation and that only faith in Christ matters. This passage shows that there is an intimate connection between authentic faith and fruitful lives. It is, of course, true that good works flow from faith filled lives and that we can deceive ourselves by 'giving our body to be burned' without love.

Fruitfulness in our lives is not the same as a CV made up of all the achievements we can number. It is more like the climax in the growth of a tree which has flowered and cannot help bearing fruit as the fulfilment of its very being. In human life it is the expression of a life founded on faith, love, truth and worship.

Trees which are not nourished by water, fertility of the soil, sunshine and pruning are often mishapen runts. Our lives can be like that too and they can bear the bitter fruits of meanness, rancour and self-righteousness. Three of the fruits of the spirit are : Love , Joy and Peace. We need to nourish these.

Question 1.

Does my peacemaking grow out of a deeper peace which is rooted and grounded in Christ?

(b) Are we building on firm foundations? Vs 46-49

It is quite clear to many of us who live in Northern Ireland that the attempt to build a community here since 1920 did not have firm foundations. Those from the Unionist tradition, (mainly protestant) felt totally insecure from the start because they believed that those from the Nationalist tradition (mainly Catholic) were bent on destroying the province. On the other hand those from the Nationalist tradition felt that they were treated as second-class citizens no matter how they acted.

A community built on fear and distrust ultimately collapsed under stress. The work of peacemaking today is partly about digging deeper to find firmer foundations based on mutual respect, the participation of all and a more equal sharing of resources.

Our text reminds us that we can profess to be followers of Christ and yet neglect the most basic aspects of his teachings.

We can be selective in our use of the bible, putting the stress on personal salvation but forgetting that salvation is about right relationships with God, with one another and with all Creation. It is about the building of personal and community life on firm foundations. Peacemaking and the

ministry of reconciliation is the calling of us all. In a global perspective this is an urgent priority because unless we recognise our interdependence in every aspect, we can destroy our 'common house' and bring catastrophe to all.

Question 2.

What are the foundations necessary for true peace in the world today?

Question 3.

Where do you begin in your own local community?

Question 4.

Do we pay lip service to a form of Christianity which costs us nothing?

Prayer:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace:

Where there is hatred; let us sow love;

Where there is injury; pardon;

Where there is doubt; faith;

Where there is despair; hope;

Where there is darkness; light;

Where there is sadness; joy. For Your Love's sake we ask it.

Amen

5. Luke 12: 57-59 Resolve you conflicts early on before they get worse!

This is a very interesting passage because it describes the process by which a conflict tends to grow. The longer we put off seeking a resolution and go on trying to win or defeat our opponent, the greater the ultimate cost we may have to pay.

All forms of rivalry tend to follow this pattern and move upwards towards violence in a tit for tat cycle. We tend to get caught up in a spiral which 'takes us over'; we say things that we later regret as we progressively demonise one another.

The skills of Mediation, which were often valued in ancient cultures, are being rediscovered today. They can make a big difference in societies where litigation and confrontation have become the norm. A Mediator can help both parties in a dispute, if they are willing, to take joint responsibility for ending the conflict in the true interests of all.

But is it possible to mediate in a dispute where there is an unequal distribution of power? Other skills such as advocacy and conciliation may be necessary stages in a process before Mediation is possible. The deepest levels of healing and reconciliation require above all else the recognition of each other's humanity and the need for repentance and forgiveness.

Question 1.

Share experiences of a conflict in which you were involved which grew dangerously?

Question 2.

What (in your experience) helped to de-escalate it?

Prayer

Set us free from the rivalries through which we destroy our relationships; Give us the wisdom and humility to seek to resolve our conflicts before they destroy us; Enable us to be peacemakers and not merely peace-lovers. Amen.

6. Matthew 10: 34-39

The gospel often divides before it can unite!

This is probably one of the most paradoxical passages in the New Testament and seems to contradict some of our most basic assumptions about the value of family life. Yet it goes to the core of Jesus' message by emphasising the need for our first loyalty to be to God and His Kingdom. If the values and priorities of any family contradict those of the Kingdom of God then they have to be questioned even at the cost of division. Only when obedience to Christ comes first is there a real foundation for community and for our family life.

This passage is especially relevant to the work of peacemaking. Divided communities - even Christian Communities - are a bit like families. Phrases like 'Blood is thicker than water' abound, creating pressures to be loyal to our tribe, right or wrong. That soon becomes a basis for 'Ethnic Cleansing'. It takes a lot of courage to be self critical of one's own tradition and to look for what is truthful and fair to all. When we try to build relationships with those from another culture we can be attacked by members of our own group with accusations of betrayal. In N Ireland Mixed marriage couples can be soft targets for abuse. It is only possible to build a truly peaceful society when enough people are prepared to stand up and be counted, exposing the bigotry and prejudice of those who nurture tribal loyalties. Reconciliation groups can come under fire for nurturing cross-community relations but they can also help those who are trapped by fears to discover the humanity of the other. Of course we are all infected with elements of bigotry, so we need to avoid self-righteousness.

However there are times when we need to risk the wrath of our family or community and to raise questions about our way of life, and our attitudes to others? Sometimes it is when we risk losing our life that it is given back to us in a new way!

Question 1.

Is peacemaking a central focus in the worship and outreach of your congregation?

Question 2.

If not why not, and what would it mean in practice to put it at the centre?

Prayer

Help us Lord, never to seek peace at any price, but to witness to truth, justice and forgiveness and all that makes for your peace, whatever the cost. Amen

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