

WHY FAITH AND INTER FAITH ENCOUNTER MATTER

Address to The Council for Christians and Jews on the occasion of their seventy-fifth anniversary

ENCOUNTERING

It is a great pleasure to be invited to share with you this celebration to mark seventy-five years of Christians and Jews meeting together in solidarity, in friendship and in dialogue. I am honoured in being asked by you to share in this marking of generations of togetherness in the encounter of faith and thank you for the significant part you have played in Inter Faith understanding, beginning in 1942. I greatly appreciate your open generosity to me in extending this invitation. The act of meeting is itself a witness. The act of invitation is itself a hospitality. In each tradition and in both traditions, there are expressions of encounter as hospitality; of hospitality as reciprocity; of reciprocity as the creation of a new community of the unexpected or even of the seemingly impossible.

ICONIC MEETINGS

Respect for The Other is what enables us to engage in such encounters with one another. We are clear that we do so with a sense of *distinction* yet not with a *division* that is *destructive* of relationship. I offer two iconic encounters:

Abraham entertaining angels unawares at The Oaks of Mamre and instinctively offering them hospitality and in the process learning for himself and for others that nothing is impossible with God (Genesis 18.1-15) *and*

The two disciples at Emmaus pressing the Risen Christ to stay with them after a long, interpretative conversation on the road – culminating in his being recognized by them in bread broken at the table of friendship and yet again in his being present to them in his tangible absence (St Luke 24.13-32).

Christian iconographers, as it happens, capture something intrinsic to each encounter, emanating from Old Testament and New Testament as Christians call them today, that holds together the presence of God, differently and distinctly understood in each tradition, in the acts of giving-and-receiving-combined. It is these acts that shape encounter as hospitality. I instantly inject a Health Warning: we must always be cognizant of and wary of supersessionism. I say this with particular feeling as John Nelson Darby, while having previously been a pupil of Westminster School in London, was curate-assistant of Delgany in my diocese of Glendalough and his pulpit still stands in Calary Church in the same diocese. He left the Church of Ireland in 1831, founded a different expression and permutation of Christianity, and died in 1882, aged 81 years; to this day he remains the father of modern supersessionism. We readily admit and accept that supersessionism remains widespread in popular Christian thinking; that it is a wrong and a scandal deeply embedded in the Christian psyche from times much earlier than the nineteenth century; and that it affects particularly the Jews. And for this we apologize and of this we repent.

DIALOGUE

Earlier generations spoke instinctively of *dialogue*. People today speak increasingly of *encounter*. This in part at least is because there was something either that earlier generations overlooked or did not readily experience but it may also have been because earlier generations over-intellectualized dialogue. And this is not to suggest that intellectual honesty is in any way wrong – far from it. It is to suggest that the understanding of education itself and its components have significantly changed in our lifetime yet again. Mass migrations of peoples, on a scale unprecedented in very recent history, have once again brought people who might never have met face to face with one another in everyday circumstances and locations – literally face to face with each other. Neutral territory and public space have become contested once again in ways that are all too familiar to Jewish people in history and today.

I digress deliberately: in mid-September I attended an Honorary Degree Ceremony in Dublin City University. One of the honorands was Professor John Coolahan, retired Professor of Education in the University of Maynooth, Ireland who has contributed to every significant piece of legislation in Irish Education over forty years, and he was given an honorary doctorate. His *History of Irish Education* remains a classic; in retirement he turned himself round and edited it afresh incorporating into his earlier work the history of life-long learning in Ireland from the Eighteenth Century, entitling the new composite whole: *Towards the Era of Life-long Learning: a history of Irish Education*. His thesis is that everything formerly available through an earlier type of learning is now available through life-long learning and the supports are there to make it happen from early childhood to old age. My point in relation to dialogue is that change of perception and change of delivery simply need not and do not alter the core activity and the intrinsic experience of dialogue as an encounter of equality and respect.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that more recently we all, as dialogue partners, have together reclaimed dialogue as both a dialogue of life and a dialogue of ideas with cross-fertilization and without contradiction. The re-integration of these, in and of itself, does no dis-service to the intellectual endeavour of dialogue as a quest for (a) greater understanding and (b) greater respect for inherited historical encounter and influences. Christians can and do say to one another: ‘A right understanding of the relationship with Judaism is fundamental to Christianity’s own self-understanding’ (*Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue* para.13). Furthermore the now common process of Scriptural Reasoning seeks to enable Jews, Christians and Muslims ‘to build sociality among its practitioners and release sources of wisdom and compassion for healing our separate communities and for repair of the world’ (Steven Kepnes, *A Handbook of Scriptural Reasoning* page 23 in David F Ford and CC Pecknold, ed. *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford, Blackwell 2006). Early Christianity likewise grappled in a principled way with the theological significance of Jewish law and religion and the Jewish people. The Letters of Paul are ample testimony to this. The rich vein of Jewish prophecy and mysticism became fundamental to the self-expression of Christianity in the time of persecution for faith in the first century of the Common Era. The Revelation to St John the Divine takes up the themes of Daniel and other prophets in a time of heightened

spiritual intensity and political repression in another and dependent tradition, that of Christianity. One festival in particular stands out for us both: Shavuot is associated with the giving of The Law; Pentecost likewise concerns outwardly social life and the common good as well as the inward response to God in the Spirit. Certainly there is distinction; certainly there is difference; certainly there is rupture; yet equally there is an attempt to address the issues of the aligning of the ways of God and humanity in different Faiths but with very similar presenting symptoms and positive hopes.

It is fashionable today to lay the blame for a slide towards a loss of respect for human dignity at the feet of the ubiquitous social media. But diminishment and demonization of The Other are a human instinct of ancient provenance. The Jewish people have consistently been the recipients of this diminishment as, in the early twentieth century and before The Shoah, were The Armenians. Encounter, storytelling and truth-telling for us together (and the leap is not easy nor can it ever be automatic or taken for granted) make the journey between the dialogue of life and the dialogue of ideas possible in such a way as to respect the experience and analyse the ideas. This also draws us into the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Encounter is the catalyst in giving us a wide room in which to combine both forms of dialogue. The one thing about life is that it is not ordinary. Life as we know it is powerfully influenced by the ideologies that surround it; they in turn can readily become popular philosophies and equally popular distortions. Life as we know it is also sacred; we are, as Genesis constantly reminds us, made in God's image and God's likeness (Genesis 1.26, 27).

GENEROUS LOVE

In the run up to The Lambeth Conference 2008, many people thought that the only show in town in the Anglican Communion was human sexuality. In fact, a number of us including Bishop Michael Ipgrave, bishop of Lichfield and someone synonymous with consistently good and strong relations between Jews and Christians and peoples of all Faiths in England, was convinced that Inter Faith issues were of more pressing theological and human concern. This was because these issues draw us directly into talk about God and about how different World Faiths discern and present God in their belief systems and how they conduct engagement with others. Since then, we have had little reason to change our minds. We were encouraged by the then archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Reverend Dr Rowan Williams, to commit something to paper and we did. In his Foreword to *Generous Love*, he caught the paradox and the dilemma of someone who wants to be true to one tradition yet actively positive in the advocacy of another. I quote: "The intellectual ferment of a couple of decades ago, when scholars began to reflect on the rival claims to truth or finality of the various faiths, has been brought home to everyone as our societies become more diverse – and, sadly, as conflicts on the global scene become more bitter." This was back in 2008 and it now reads like an everyday life from which there is no escape. The pace of change is fast. Life is not ordinary. Hope is fragile and precious.

Anglicans are a minority right across the world. In every Province this is the case. England and the Church of England are a special case because of Establishment. Things

are rather different for the rest of us and through the economy of scale. As both parties to our celebration today well know, being an Inter Faith partner requires first being true to yourself and then being true to others through the principle that might be expressed like this: Finding the self in God and in The Other. It is a principle of Faith and a principle of trust; it is a principle of humanity and a principle of community; it is most of all a principle of vulnerability and of glory. At its most basic, identity therefore is relational and moves on from being individual. It continues all the time to be personal but with a dynamic and moving emphasis and focus. And, as social beings, we are creators of community – but always with the capacity for destruction of community.

Generous Love seeks to give us, as Anglicans, a sense of perspective about a number of things. One is about the contribution that we want to make to civil society through the principles that form and inform our practice, that is, Scripture, Tradition and Reason. The second is about our pressing and permanent need of others and particularly of those of Other World Faiths in order more properly to understand ourselves and our place in the world. Our history is not particularly pretty. Realization of our potential insignificance as well as of our potential importance (for they are quite different things) is a recent recognition – and only admitted since the death of Christendom; realization of the wrongs we have done others in the name of religion and colonialism, denominationalism and sectarianism have catapulted us into reassessing our motivation and our mission. And so we are back to what is a basic Anglican instinct: building community with others, not on our terms but relationally. It is this instinct that has come back to the fore through our recognition of vulnerability and need; more than anything else it has led us into both ecumenism and Inter Faith encounter and relationship. And internal wranglings and divisions within the Anglican Communion heighten the resistance to and the urgency of both as real theological needs on our part.

GENEROUS LOVE – SOME POINTERS

The recognition I have outlined above is not, nor can it be, static. Worldwide, aggressive and intolerant forms of believing and belonging are growing in all the world's religious traditions. Worldwide, governments are exercised about the place of religion in public life and governments and religions are exercised about the scope of human rights as well as religious freedom. The very concept of: 'the local' means something quite different as generations of residents change and the locality takes on a new and a different feel. The village is perpetually a different place. 'The local' is pivotal to identity, encounter and dialogue. Religion and culture, to the surprise of secular policy makers with overwhelmingly materialist presuppositions and often unwarranted globalized models of community, are public markers of identity and all the more precious as people are forcibly deprived of material security and continuity by enforced emigration and immigration. *Generous Love* takes as one of its cornerstones the maxim applicable to all religions today: 'we face the challenge of discerning the loving purposes of God within the religious plurality of humankind.' My purpose in quoting this is further to point out that plurality does not imply or mean syncretism. My contention is that neither religion nor plurality has gone away in a world of vaunted irreligiosity.

Within our Anglican framework, we accept and respect that we are Reformed and post-Reformation. We will continue to disagree, particularly in the year when we mark 500 years of The Reformation, about the extent to which we severally care to call ourselves Protestant. Be that as it may, The Reformation left the nations of Europe with a range of choices about the implementation of a theological revolution in thought regarding the interpretation of God's self-expression in the life of community and individual. A new framework asks new questions. For Anglicans, the interpretative key that eventually emerged is twofold: (1) Trinitarian in terms of theology; (2) the application of Scripture, Tradition and Reason as regards interpretation and organic understanding. By organic I mean the response theologically and practically to the circumstances and discoveries and inventions that surround us all the time and that are the bearers and the catalysts of change. These changes surround all of us irrespective of our Faith. Most explicitly today, these affect beginning and end of life issues although in no way are they confined to them. Nonetheless, these issues have become the most pressing because they are the most open to scientific manipulation and therefore, by response and reciprocation, the most fiercely protected.

If I may crave your indulgence, I shall outline ways in which Trinitarian thought patterns offer Anglicans scope to engage in Inter Faith encounter and dialogue. God as One offers coherence to a world of manifold diversity in the understanding that it has one source and goal in God. God as Son, manifest in a particular human life, encourages Anglicans to work out our concerns historically. God as Spirit speaks not only to and of inwardness (what is conventionally seen as: the spiritual) but to and of the conditions that make functioning and flourishing social life as an essential substratum of the public good that is to be formed and refreshed, reconciled and restored. I fully accept that this theological paradigm is peculiar to Christianity and is used in specific ways in Anglicanism but it seeks to facilitate encounter and dialogue with civic society and with those of World Faiths.

The second thought pattern we owe to Richard Hooker (1554-1600) and it is: Scripture, Tradition and Reason. It is normal for Scriptural people throughout history to live in religious plurality; it is also realistic to understand that such experience has shaped and continues to shape the reception and application of formative texts of Scripture. They too are organic and historical and well as being divinely inspired. The priority of Scripture is largely uncontested in the Anglican tradition. The problem for more and more Anglicans worldwide is the horizon and the limit of its sufficiency, or even self-sufficiency, as the definitive tool of interpretation both of its own content and of the applied theological situations that Anglicans face and to which Scripture, as inherited in each generation, makes no explicit or inexplicit reference. New discoveries and new circumstances are all what we might call Copernican moments.

Classical Anglicanism combined Scripture with Tradition and Reason; contemporary Anglicanism has added Experience to this triad in recognition perhaps of context and personality as determining factors in someone's reaction, response or rejection. As I said above, the early followers of Jesus Christ, who were both Jew and Gentile, grappled with the theological significance of Jewish law and religion and the Jewish people, as what we

Christians call The New Testament richly reveals. The recognition of the historical specificity as well as the historical limitations of our own Scriptures can, and often does, enable us to appreciate and respect the theological vitality of both written and oral tradition, within a recognition of difference. Our own limitations can and ought to open us to the richness of traditions other than our own. Tradition and Reason bring us into two inalienable contexts, the former into the mind of the church as it develops alongside the application of Scripture, the latter into the mind of the cultures in which the church participates (Virginia Report 1997) and which develop often along highly traditional lines even though the churches frequently find themselves 'behind the curve of' contemporary Western and Northern Hemisphere cultures. The Anglican use of Reason draws on the tradition of the Wisdom of God (or indeed on God as Wisdom) as well as on the philosophical, sociological and psychological information and insights that shape a reading of context and inform a theological response to scientific advance, technological development and religious plurality. This, in turn, has a profound effect on the understanding of mission. It invites mission first and foremost to be a giving of an account of who you are as a child of God before your neighbour and a commitment on your part to the quest to seek to find yourself in the heart of God and of your neighbour and of The Other. This is a new and difficult form of hospitality in which the enemy becomes the guest and where the language of reconciliation has to be the lingua franca. The complexity of the above needs to be the centring of our Faith in a Christ-like friendship with people of our own Faith and people of Other Faiths – with rigorous consistency; we ought not to engage in special pleading for ourselves if we do not engage in advocacy of others. Mission and Inter Faith Encounter cannot avoid the conversation about their relationship one with the other. The logjam comes when either or both talk about conversion.

A FURTHER TRIAD

I quote from *Generous Love*: 'We can recognize the three following dynamic patterns in particular through which we are being led into ... newness of life. First, maintaining our presence among communities of other faiths, we are abiding signs of the body of Christ in each place. Second, engaging our energies with other groups for the transformation of society, we are being sent in the power of the Spirit into each situation. Third, offering embassy and hospitality to our neighbours, we are both giving and receiving the blessing of God our Father.' (GL page 8) In no way is this designed to be exclusive of those who do not have a Trinitarian interpretation and understanding of God; it is a confessedly Trinitarian interpretation of doctrine as applied and lived theologically so as to offer a paradigm of confidence and humility as something urgent to Anglicans to live it out in a multi-religious and Inter Faith world.

I turn – almost finally – to *Presence and Engagement, Sending and Abiding, Embassy and Hospitality* as a triad of involvement and receptivity in the expression of the Christian Faith and the Anglican Tradition among Others to whom we ourselves are Other. *Presence and Engagement* expresses our commitment to be a stable presence in each place, to sanctify the life of the local community through both prayer and witness. We seek to do this in full expression of who we are – the body of Christ living – and in

full recognition of our limitations. We seek to do this as a contribution of blessing to our neighbours, patterning gracious and generous discipleship and shaping with our neighbours a community that we construct together. Service has to be the core of this; advocacy and empowerment have to be the fruit of this – advocacy and empowerment of our neighbours, whatever their faith.

Sending and Abiding and *Embassy and Hospitality* work together as a recognition of initiative and responsibility in our journey of faith and in the setting of all of this expression in the context of others who are already there. In a self-consciously missionary religion we need to learn, as disciples, to be guests over against assuming an entitlement to be hosts. The proclamation we are to make in our embassy is first and foremost the blessing of peace, the announcement of the good news of the Kingdom of God and the healing of the sick. A second feature of our embassy is not self-proclamation; it is the double and inter-related proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4.5). All of this is compatible with Inter Faith dialogue of life and dialogue of ideas (encounter most broadly understood) and also with reconciliation which remains a key need and ingredient in civic and in religious life and I suggest always will do. (2 Corinthians: 5.20). Hospitality and reconciliation come together to help us to connect spaces of meeting and spaces of public life. This is where the spirit of *Embassy and Hospitality* combine to drive out exclusivity as the entitled territory of either group. It is for this reason that advocacy of The Other is vital to the flourishing of the self. *Sending and Abiding* speak to a vitality that makes possible new life around a shared habitat, that is the world in which we live and to which we live, a world where those with power recognize that ecology is both the new politics and the new theology precisely because the very basic quality of ecology betokens its ultimacy. (Religious people call this the relationship between earth and heaven.) Exploration and curiosity are the way of human nature. We need to bring this energy into our relationships with those of Faiths Other than our own.

All of the above is, of course, work in progress. I should like to argue that it is entirely compatible with the Christian faith; that, in its honesty of intention, it offers itself as open to criticism and refinement on a daily basis by those of Other Faiths and also to engagement around truth claims that are rightly and rigorously to be tested against the Canons of Humanity and the requirement to love God and love our neighbour as we love ourselves and, dare I add, wish ourselves to be loved by others.

GENEROUS LOVE – SOME OMISSIONS

Your time of listening to me is almost at an end. You may indeed share that sense of depleted expectation attributed by Anthony Trollope to Archdeacon Grantley on his hearing the first sermon of Mr Slope in Barchester Cathedral: 'the venerable gentleman's anxious longing for escape.' For my part I should like, given more time, to add *Individual and Community* as a fourth strand to the expression of Generous Love. I should like to go further and suggest that from The Jewish Tradition in particular we need to learn a lot more about three things:

Creation and Ecology
Justice and Righteousness
Memory and History,
yet another triad, as we continue this exploration of *Generous Love* with openness and
with creativity in a dialogue of heartfelt hope.

Michael Jackson, archbishop of Dublin

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