

LEADER'S ADDRESS AT SERVICE OF DEDICATION
Sunday, 11 January 2004

Text: *Colossians 1: 15-20*

Trevor has just read one of the great New Testament texts about reconciliation. I have a subsidiary text and it comes from that well known exponent of political realism, Machiavelli:

"If one wants a republic or sect to live a long time it is necessary to bring it back often to its beginnings."

However, he goes on to say

"It is as clear as light that without renovation these bodies cannot last. The mode of renovation is, as I have said, to reduce them towards their origins."

The founding vision of Corrymeela is located in Ray Davey's vision of reconciliation and Christian Community. It has a concrete focus in Ray's life – in his wartime experience of being a prisoner of war and of being outside Dresden when the city was firebombed in February 1945. This vision was not located in the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and South Tyrone (with apologies of course to those of you who come from Fermanagh and Tyrone). It is located firstly in Ray's experience and secondly in a Christian vision of reconciliation which speaks of remade humanity, of renewed and redeemed relationships, of restored community, of the acceptance of limitation, of suffering vulnerability, of self-emptying love that makes space for others. A Christian community has this knowledge at its heart, as it centres itself round the person of Jesus Christ.

At this point in our history we are called to newness and we will get there, as Machiavelli suggests, by a return to our roots, to our founding vision. And our founding vision tells us that we will find future vision by not being a community relations organisation but a Christian community of reconciliation, with all its imperfection, fragmentation and fragility. I want now to explore a particular sentence of our Colossians' text

"He is [i.e. Jesus is] the image of the unseen God."

For image read 'face'.

He is the face of the unseen God.

Jesus Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, embodies the face of God. The Jewish writer, Emmanuel Levinas, is the philosopher who highlights the importance of the face. In face of the other – in particular the vulnerable face of the other – we are called to respond. Levinas suggests that, in the human face, we see a trace of the divine face.

In Corrymeela, particularly in the Ballycastle Centre, there are lots of faces, often vulnerable faces. Not statistics for funders or that demeaning word 'clients' but faces. Let us not forget it.

Corrymeela does not exist for its members or for its staff or for its volunteers, important as these are, but for all the faces who come through our centres, and the people who, in all our different ways, we work with and relate to, and even the

people we cannot work with or relate to, the people who are outside the bubble of our concern, the people who are outside our comfort zone, the people who we do not see, the people whose faces we look through. We are challenged to extend our sympathies to see people we do not want to see in the world of the DUP and Sinn Fein who are today the dominant parties in Northern Ireland.

The Christian community is a community of the face, being graced by God embodied in Jesus Christ, called to face this Jesus, seeing the face of God reflected in creation and especially in each human face. And there is a certain summing up of this in a verse in John Bell's hymn:

So did the Word of Grace
Proclaim in time and space
And with a human face
'I am for you'

And of course reconciliation is a face to face encounter for only then can we speak and hopefully hear each other. Rembrandt's painting *Wrestling with the Angel* portrays Jacob wrestling with a mysterious figure, possibly an angel, possibly God. Jacob is having his neck slowly and painfully turned so that he looks this figure in the face. Reconciliation has to occur face to face. There may be lessons here for Northern Ireland politics. Sinn Fein and the DUP will eventually have to meet face to face. Anyway this story suggests that reconciliation does not occur without travail, without pain. Jacob limps towards reconciliation with his brother Esau in a later part of the story.

The Bible makes it clear that reconciliation is not some sentimental togetherness, something warm and fuzzy. So, called to newness, called to return to roots, a community of the face.

Finally I want to return to that sentence in Colossians again

"He is the image of the unseen God."

The Greek word for image gives us our word *icon*. So he, that is Jesus, is the icon of the unseen God. An icon makes something important visible. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ makes God's reconciliation visible.

There are people who make reconciliation visible – who are icons of reconciliation. Mandela and Tutu are well known examples in South Africa. But there are many others, unheard, unsung, people here in this church, people who are gifts from God, who embody grace at play: grace as beauty. Reconciliation is not some abstraction, theory, concept or a course. It is embodied in persons, in relationships. It is a life's practice. It is a craft we learn from others. The challenge is for us, in our own way, to imitate these living icons.

So may the Lord bless us and keep us
The Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious to us
The Lord lift up his countenance upon us and give us peace.
Amen.

David Stevens