

## Service of Dedication 2010

### Being Reconciliation

Hosea 11: 1-4

2 Corinthians 6: 8b-10

Perhaps one of the odd things about western Christianity is that if we look at artists' images of God from the Middle Ages to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, what is likely to strike us is that God is nearly always represented as a great authority figure. In the Middle Ages he is a heavenly baron, or a king, or a judge. Fighting, ruling, condemning to death seem to be his major occupations. Perhaps one of the best known of the post-medieval pictures of God is by William Blake. Eyes flashing, arm outstretched, finger pointing, God is leaning out of a thunder cloud, surrounded by lightning, issuing a terrible command. Here is Authority personified, demanding obedience, brooking no delay or temporisation, ready to punish the least deviation from his commands with fearful severity. This is the God who does not suffer but inflicts suffering. This is the imperial God who through power and might makes things happen and it is a God we can understand, and many of us have internalised.

By contrast the greatest religious painter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Georges Rouault portrays God made vulnerable in Jesus Christ. The face of Jesus is a symbol of the pain of the world. He also painted clowns and prostitutes. His famous picture *The Clown* has a sort of sad-faced clown with a painted hat and a fluffy collar – the clown, the outsider, the dislocated person who bears tension away in laughter but carries pain behind the mask. In his greatest work, *Miserere* there is a print of a clown with the title 'Who Does Not wear a Mask?' And for Rouault when God sees the faces of suffering humanity he sees the insulted face of the suffering Christ.

The work of Rouault is echoed in the novel *Silence* by the Japanese Catholic author Shusaku Endo. In *Silence* Endo tells how a Jesuit priest, Rodrigues, goes to Japan in the seventeenth century to discover why his former mentor had renounced his Christian faith. Rodrigues is zealous, tough, a hardened soldier for Christ – and yet in his search finds the Christ he has been trained to follow loyally is silent. At the end of the novel, Rodrigues is captured, imprisoned and finally ordered to follow his mentor's example and renounce his faith. To symbolise his final abandonment of Christ, he is instructed to grind an icon in the mud under his foot. He hesitates – and is told that so long as he delays Christian prisoners will be tortured. In an agony of indecision, he suddenly hears the long-silent Christ speak to him. 'Trample! Trample my face!', says the filthy icon. 'It is to be trampled on by you that I am here.'

Nothing could better capture the rejection by the book's author of the Imperial God. It is only when the icon is lying in the mud, shorn of all glory and power and dignity, that he can allow it to speak, 'a forsaken Christ to a forsaken man; a suffering Christ to a suffering man; a Christ who had been very near apostasy to a man about to apostasize. Only such a Christ could bring a word of acceptance, peace and hope in such a time to such a man.' And it is only when Rodrigues too has been shorn of his

certainties, his confidences, his battle-trained hard shell, when he has been dislocated and dispossessed that he is able to hear what such a Christ has to say. It is a message his old self would have regarded as blasphemous. Now he can receive it as a word of life.

The Christ we see in Endo and Rouault etched in word and line shows weakness, vulnerability, insignificance, dependence and nothingness. He has eyes for the invisible. He does not command territory. He is in the broken middle, in the place of painful encounter, in the place of failed words. He is 'poor'. He has no secure home, he dies outside the camp (Heb 13: 12) in the unholy place. He is the person who

Emptied himself

Taking the form of a slave

Becoming as human beings are; (Phil 2: 7)

God's initiative in Jesus is to enter in full vulnerability, the heart of human resistance to God, to be embodied among humans, offering participation in the divine life, being reconciliation. This is the pathos, the pity, the grief, the sorrow, of God. And it is in this total poverty that Christ transforms our situation. Giving himself, transparent to God's love, making himself God's space, he gives us a home, he enables us to 'be' to find space and freedom – to become 'wealthy'. It is this new way of being in the world through being weak and powerless – being 'poor' that Jesus is with us and helps us.

There is no situation he cannot enter to undermine division and rivalry and create new relatedness. The German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a letter from prison – a man who had made the transition from security to 'poverty', a man who dies inside a camp, but outside the camp of Nazism, says of Jesus, 'he is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us'.

And on the occasion of Ray's 95<sup>th</sup> birthday let us remember the dislocation, the dispossession, the poverty of being a prisoner of war and seeing ten square miles of the destruction of Dresden – a world where any talk of reconciliation would seem to be a fantasy. And let us celebrate that out of this poverty he made many of us wealthy. This is actually what it means to be evangelical and to see this wealth is to see salvation.

Ray out of his dislocation and dispossession made himself a meeting place and a place for others. He created a community and a place dedicated to making people rich, through giving and receiving. And, of course, there are other people present today who out of their poverty have made the wealth of Christ visible.

We should dedicate ourselves to serious and unapologetic wealth creation – we are at work to make each other rich, to make each other human and the person who gives us that possibility is the poor Christ. Nor should we forget that we live from the wealth creation of the communion of saints – the four founder members of this Community who died in the last thirteen months, John Morrow, Kathleen Davey, Margaret Ritchie and Joyce Nice.

It is in his way of weakness and powerlessness that Jesus points to a pattern of right relationships and order in the world – how we might be rightly ‘wealthy’, an approach to living that expresses compassion and a wholeness of human desire which takes the other person seriously. This is the ‘wealth’, this is fullness of life.

‘Poor ourselves, we bring wealth to many’. Paul was constantly aware of his poverty, his weakness – and if he was ever in danger of forgetting it, his critics, especially in Corinth, were all too happy to remind him. And of course, he was a man with a past, a victimiser of the church. But out of his dislocation and weakness he could proclaim the richness and graciousness of God. In his life Paul knows that weakness, vulnerability and failure are the ordinary human stuff with which God works.

And it is to many. Not to all. For not everyone wants this sort of wealth or can receive it. There are those who do not want this sort of God, or a Jesus who asks us about the boundaries of our self-protective ‘we-ness’, our ‘I-ness’ - all those worlds of separation we want to keep intact, of sexuality, ethnic difference, race, socio-economic division -because he has died outside them. This is the challenge of genuine Catholicity. As such he continually asks the questions: Who are you? Behind the mask who are you? Calling us to have eyes to see the ‘poor’ in their various forms in our midst. Calling us into possibilities of transformation. Calling us to pilgrimage into diverse places, calling us into ways of being with others. Calling us into ways of inhabiting reconciliation. Calling us to find our story in his story.

May we be poor that we possess everything.

David Stevens