SERMON FROM COVENTRY CATHEDRAL

PREACHER   John Witcombe, Dean
DATE        7 September 2014
EVENT       Cathedral Eucharist
BIBLE READINGS Romans 13.8-14; Matthew 18.15-20
THEME       The Table of Forgiveness

There was great celebration in the Ricoh Stadium on Friday night. I was really excited at the return of the Coventry city Football Club to their home ground, and proud that we had been part of the story that brought them back. I’m not really a die-hard football fan, but there’s something about the emotional intensity of the game that sweeps you along with the other 27,000 people that are there – it’s fabulous.

Lots of people were wanting to talk to me about how grateful they were for the part that I and the cathedral had played in the return to the Ricoh. But on the phone in my pocket was an email from someone who was extremely critical (both of what we had done, and the way we’d talked about it) – it took the edge off, a bit, as you might expect. But that’s the story of working in reconciliation.

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It’s been a hard week. I’ve discovered afresh that being at the heart of reconciliation is costly .... The emotional energy alone is considerable. Of course, this is a truth that others have learned here, and spoken of, before me – so there’s part of me that is grateful to be standing for myself on the hallowed ground of our tradition. And it’s a place on which Jesus stood, or hung, and so we know what it looks like.

So I’ve been learning, again, for myself something of what it means to be involved in the work of the gospel — and having everyone like you, or getting everything right, is just not the way it is. But it is a place of hope – not because we get it right, but because we have been promised a way forward when we get it wrong. In our lives we find ourselves in cul-de-sacs, dead ends, sometimes occasionally, sometimes more often. It seemed to me, and to so many in this city, that we were in that place in the dispute over the stadium. Often you can’t quite see how you got onto the path that led you down this blind and forbidding alley to start with ... and everybody's stories will certainly be different – who was to blame, what the motivations were for turning down this route, who was and who wasn’t to be trusted.

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But this is of course the story of humanity – and the story of God’s rescue plan for us in Jesus Christ. Everything we do in the ministry of reconciliation is a concrete expression, here in this time and in this place, of the eternal work and universal work of God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

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There was a lovely moment of personal revelation during the interview on the radio on Saturday morning a couple of weeks ago, when I heard myself saying, what we bring to the table is ... The table. And that is a profoundly Eucharistic expression, although that reference may not have been apparent to the listeners on the breakfast show – or indeed, to me, at the time.

At the heart of our life as a Christian community is a table – a table where Christ makes himself present today in bread and wine. It’s a table of invitation, a table of fellowship, and friendship. But here’s the thing: it’s not a table of perfection, but a table of forgiveness. (There’s a church in New York, St. Bartholomew’s right opposite the Plaza Hotel, which used to have a great banner across its doorway which read ‘Come in your Sunday Worst.’) The table which sits at the heart of our life is a place to practice, not impersonal and inhuman ‘perfection’, but personal,
human, forgiveness. We belong together because of our humanity, made perfect in the offering of Christ, not in anything we are or do.

Paul and Jesus both speak into this truth in our Bible readings today. Paul tells the Christians in Rome to ‘owe no-one anything - except to love one another’. Love is an action, a way of living which seeks above anything the good of the other – and it must start with seeing the other as a human being. Don’t live selfishly, he says – live for the good of one another, for the ‘Common Good’.

I’ve been asked repeatedly what the cathedral did which made a difference in the Ricoh dispute, and I’ve been asking myself the same question. We brought the table, I said – and invited people to sit and meet each other again as human beings, not as monsters. To eat together, and talk together in a different way – to disagree differently is a Coventry distinctive. It doesn’t mean any sort of moral judgment on any of the participants, including ourselves – but it does mean we will not allow ourselves or others to be trapped by caricatures, or by the past.

And this is just the sort of meal that we have here, day by day and Sunday by Sunday. When Jesus offers his promise in the gospel passage, “when two or three are gathered, there am I among them”, it's not so much about encouraging people when only a tiny number have come to the prayer meeting. ... It’s about Jesus presence helping people to be the church, when they are struggling with forgiveness. That’s the context. Put Jesus into the middle of a gathering, remember that he used to have dinner with tax collectors and sinners, and recognise that church happens wherever people are gathered together with Jesus ... When he comes to have dinner with us. We are the people he chooses to have dinner with, not because we are perfect but because we are not.

So how do we practice being church? By practicing being perfect? Not at all - by practicing forgiveness, practicing acceptance. We need to do that for one another, and we need to do it to the outsider - and sometimes it seems we are better at doing it for the outsider than one another!

I have been enjoying Mpho and Desmond Tutu's book, about which she spoke at Greenbelt ... The road to forgiveness. I commend it to you. We all need forgiving. We all need to forgive. Or we live in a whole bunch of well defended little prisons, internally and externally defended. We can't get out. Others can't get in.

Two weeks ago I quoted Rowan Williams, 'the church exists because something has happened which makes the whole business of self justification irrelevant'. Actually he was quoting, I learned this week, one of the early monastic teachers from the desert communities outside Cairo in the early Christian centuries, John the Dwarf. (It sounds rather exotic, but actually it's our normality.)

We bring the table to the table. That's what Jesus does too - he gives us the table, the place where he makes himself present, the place where everyone is invited to take a place. I have never really got that business of a limited invitation to communion - where only some are welcome. It was a tradition that developed very early in the life of the Christian church ... But it sits uneasily with what we know of the one who sits with tax collectors and sinners, and presumably invites them to sit with him? John Wesley understood the power of the Eucharist to reach into people's lives with love, even from a place where they knew nothing of Jesus before hand, and not in any way dependent even on baptism, much less confirmation. Sara Miles, one of this year's speakers at GB, has written of her experience of wandering into a church in San Francisco out of curiosity, holding out her hands and discovering that someone put God into her palms, and into her mouth – and she turned from atheism to faith because of it.

The table of gathering, the table of the hospitality of Jesus, is at the heart of our life and our ministry. It's the heart of this cathedral building, and the architecture, very deliberately. There is a challenge around that - this building requires people to make a journey to get to the altar ... Some would argue the altar should be there in the middle of the people, as in Paddy's Wigwam in Liverpool ... I think that's probably true, but this also helps us in different ways to be ready to give and receive life at the table of The Lord.
Don't protect it! This is a table where Jesus sits. Don't hold back. Don't hold others back.

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And so back to this week, when I became quite embroiled in a question about blessing. Should we bless a place, or a people, where relationships are not truly reconciled, where things aren't perfect? Well, yes - that's why it needs blessing. What's the point of blessing something that's already perfect - there is nothing left for God to do.

The church is a place of blessing not because we know we are perfect, but because we know we are not - and surprise, surprise, God knows that too.

This is a place for us to speak the word of Jesus to one another, to speak of the invitation of love. It has become clear to us in recent months that the values which we need to use as a touchstone here are the values of Welcome, Worship, and Reconciliation. And that's revealed most clearly as we gather at the altar.

George Herbert:

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'

Love said, 'You shall be he.'

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on Thee.'

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,

'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'

'My dear, then I will serve.'

'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'

So I did sit and eat.

Let's eat together.