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"Preaching in the Midst of Conflict"

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First of all I wish to thank the members of the E.H. Johnson Trust for honouring me with this year's award and for their generosity in bringing me from Ireland and looking after me while I am in Canada. I am following in the footsteps of a very distinguished group of people. To be named in a list of people which includes the likes of John Bell is an honour in itself.

I have about twenty minutes to speak about a subject the complexity of which has produced a library of books, acres of newsprint, hours of "on the spot" reporting and a myriad of documentaries, all of which have left people baffled and, in most cases, only partially comprehending.

MINORITIES AND MAJORITIES.

Let me come to the issue using the categories of majorities and minorities, about which you know something in Canada.

Dr. Duncan Morrow from the Faculty of Humanities in the University of Ulster put it like this at a conference in 1998 at New College in the University of Edinburgh[i].

"After World War 1 the notion of self determination was developed as a defence against autocratic power, but the concept of self-determination can now be used in the service of the massive suppression of minorities. Self-determination can be seen as right exercised over against other people. History as "righteous cause" traps some people inside the gates and traps others outside as "unrighteous".

That is what people of a unionist and protestant persuasion felt would happen in the early decades of the last century. They feared that the granting of self determination to the people living on the island of Ireland, as a single whole, would result in the installation of a democratically elected Irish government which would be overwhelming Nationalist and Roman Catholic in outlook. They believed that such a government would have little sympathy with dissenting notions of liberty or the rights of Protestants. Believing themselves to be facing the fate of being democratically overwhelmed they resisted such all Ireland self determinations and Ireland was divided.

This solution outraged the majority Irish catholic population who maintained that it was the will of the majority in Ireland which ought to have prevailed.
The partitioning of Ireland resulted, as we know, in a complicated mosaic of inclusions and exclusions, taking account of both fears and aspirations, many of them with roots in our divided religious life. Two majority communities were produced, one in the Republic and one in Northern Ireland, and simultaneously two minorities, trapped within their borders.

Two quasi-confessional states resulted, each of them unsatisfactory. One reflected the Irish catholic nationalist convictions or biases of the majority electorate south of the border and the other the British protestant unionist convictions or biases of the other majority electorate north of the border.

The trouble with nationalism and unionism and the kind of militant republicanism with which we have become familiar is that they provide some people with a sense of belonging while excluding others. Only some are embraced. Neither ideology has managed to enhance the quality of self-esteem in both parts of the

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community. Many of us have been happy to belong safely within a part of the whole, while being unaware of the experience of those thereby excluded.

It is possible for devotion to ideologies to become an arrogant, exclusive and excluding base passion. They can recruit churches to their cause and unleash untold trouble on societies unless they accommodate, and are themselves accommodated within, wider concerns. Both ideologies were linked with different branches of the Christian Church, which branches until comparatively recently did not recognise the authentic ecclesial significance of one another; finding such significance either non-existent, deficient or impaired.

Churches need to beware of the "beatification" of national and provincial identity, especially if that identity is of a majority community. When political conflicts are sacralised, we cease to be the masters of political strategy and instead become the servants of ideology. When ideologies are reinforced by exclusive and excluding ecclesiological loyalties there is produced a potent recipe for profound exclusion and the absence of embrace of the "stranger, the neighbour or the other".

PARTIAL EMBRACE

You may be able with the use of your imagination to transpose what I am going to describe to a Canadian setting.

Imagine two groups of people characterised not only by language and ethnicity, but also by religion, some being catholic and some protestant. Paramilitary groups have become engaged in violence, which means that people have been murdered, buildings have been damaged, and businesses destroyed.
Funerals of civilians, paramilitary activists, soldiers and police officers have been held in catholic and protestant churches. Presbyterian ministers and catholic priests have comforted the bereaved and officiated at the funerals. There is intense emotion, deep grief and passionately held convictions about the rightness and wrongness of what is happening. The discourse goes deeper than rationality for the feelings are intense.

To these people, who have lost fathers, brothers, sisters, mothers, daughters, sons, close colleagues and friends, their ministers and their priests must offer ongoing pastoral care. They must also at previously designated times, conduct public worship and preach.

What are they to say in the prayers and the sermons?

Avoid the current issues and speak about issues of another time or another place?
Speak so generally that people are unclear as to what is being said?
Speak about the issues, but with so many subordinate clauses in each sentence that the clear word has become opaque?
Speak about the issues but in solidarity with one side or the other?
Speak about the issues with care but set them in a wider context?

Concerning this challenge, the journalist Ian Linden wrote in the (London) Independent[ii]:

"... the traditional response of both the Catholic and Protestant churches (to killings) has been to condemn the violence and then to confine themselves to pastoral work within their respective communities, particularly in consoling the bereaved. This is admirable, but is it adequate? Such an inward focus binds churches to their communities, but makes it difficult for them to reach across the sectarian divide".

I think this is true. For over thirty years the churches on the whole held people back from confrontation and civil conflict, condemned the bombings and the killings, urged angry, frustrated and bereaved people to refrain from retaliation and commended those few people who managed to reach deep within themselves to offer forgiveness to people who had done unspeakable things to the people they loved. The church, at the

same time, did not fail to offer comfort to other people who could not find the resources within themselves to go that far.

That people from different parts of the Northern Ireland community have not descended into the atrocities of civil war says something about their forbearance and their capacity to absorb suffering. It is worth consider what would have happened of the resources of the churches had been deployed in the service of vengeance.

Much of this pastoral ministry was offered to small communities of people in lonely, vulnerable and isolated places. Many individuals have had long and lonely journeys of grief and readjustment after they have lost the people who were very close to them, upon whom many of them had previously leaned for support.

The inward focus binding churches to their communities, mentioned by Ian Linden, illustrates how easy it is for churches to find themselves shackled to communities which are in conflict with one another. It is easy to understand how churches become trapped within the anxieties, the prejudices and the convictions of the wider communities from which ministers, priests, elders and members are drawn and of which they are a continuing part.

Miroslav Volf in a wonderful book "Exclusion and Embrace"[iii] wrote about "the excessive demand for loyalty" experienced in the pressures of the conflict in his native Croatia "... there is little room left for the luxury of divided loyalties". We know something about that in Northern Ireland. Volf maintains that issues of "identity and otherness" have to be placed at the core of theological reflection.

Seamus Heaney in an interview in the Times in October 1984 spoke of the tension between the individual and the group in Ireland.

"Everyone in the North is born with a sense of solidarity with one or the other group. So the emergent self grows, carrying responsibility for the group, holding the line, keeping up the side. But as you come to different awarenesses you know that there are complicated concessions to be made; truths to be told beyond the official shibboleths ... and yet the moment you set them down ... it seems like betrayals ... you become conscious that you are not just yourself, you are part of the group ... so the idea of the freed self becomes very attractive".

If it is of any comfort to us, Ireland is not the only place which faces these issues. Maybe that ought not to be of any comfort, other than to reassure us that other people face problems which are not dissimilar,

In April 1998, John Paul Lederach in an address at an international symposium in Notre Dame University on *Religious Dimensions of Violence, Peace and Security,* pointed out that there are somewhere between 45 and 50 wars or conflicts being waged at the present minute. Most of them are internal within nation states, rather than between nation states. A great many are long standing and protracted, to which there will be no easy or quick solutions. He said that the principle fault lines, which cause these conflicts, run within nations states and are characterised by issues connected with ethnicity, religion or race. Since the conflicts are localised they are therefore more intense as the experience of atrocity has been occasioned by localised groups whose people often intersect with one another.

If Lederach is right that it takes as long to build a peace as it does to wage a war, then this is no time for complacency.

FROM STALEMATE TO UNCERTAINTY

While the churches have been unremitting in their condemnation of paramilitary violence and their calls for an end to it, it was clear throughout that as well as ending violence it was necessary for the different parts of the community to reach some kind political accommodation with one another.

The Church and Government Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, in 1996, at one crucial phase in the history of the last 30 years, encouraged politicians of all parties, including those parties associated with paramilitary organisations, to engage in talks to see if it was possible to achieve an acceptable political accommodation[iv].

The Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, which was reached after long and complicated negotiations, is an attempt to address this issue. While a majority of people in both parts of Ireland supported the Agreement, a very significant minority, especially of Protestants and unionists in Northern Ireland, are unhappy with the concessions which have been made to their political opponents, especially those associated with terrorism.

We have moved from the stability of political stalemate when the violence was at its height, within which stalemate many people were being killed and businesses destroyed, to the uncertainty of transition to something new. We are not too sure what it will be like and it engenders more anxiety in some people than the violent stalemate.

I work in North Belfast, which is often in the news. Serious civil conflict makes great TV pictures and the world's media descend on us to film the presenting problems but seldom stay long enough to understand or describe the underlying conditions. Sixty seconds does not give much time for analysis.

North Belfast is characterised by low educational achievement, inadequate housing, poor health and a patchwork quilt of micro identities where people from different parts of the community, who are dominated by fear, anger and hatred, are jammed against each other, in close proximity to each other and separated by walls and fences. Paradoxically, North Belfast is also characterised by the presence of some of the best schools in Northern Ireland; some of the best housing located in a very desirable physical environment.

The underlying problem is described as one of sectarianism, which is a harsh word, expressing a harsh reality and often hurled as an accusing, condemning weapon. What is it[v]?

Sectarianism may be understood as a good thing which has become diseased.   The good thing has to do with the affirmation of personal and communal identity – "who I am and who we are". It becomes diseased when we become dependent upon our hostility to other people in defining ourselves. Our positive understanding of ourselves thus becomes deformed into what Marc Gopin[vi] calls "oppositional identity" which focuses on minutiae of practice that make a clear boundary between who is in and who is out of the group, who can be trusted and who cannot be trusted, rituals that become, in their modern incarnation, markers of ethnic and national trust, markers of distinction, markers of insulation from a dangerous world".

RESOURCES

I asked earlier of where the resources are to be found which give the churches the freedom to escape from entrapment within alienated communities. Where is that freedom to be found? From where do the resources come which might set us free?

Religious differences in Ireland are part of the problem, but there are resources within the shared theology of the churches.

CHRISTOLOGY

The core of the gospel is about Jesus Christ. But who is this Jesus Christ? People who hear the gospel are invited to put their faith in Jesus Christ and that in a personal way: but not in such a way that reduces the significance of Christ to the dimensions of the individual or to the dimensions of a country, or a part of a country or an ethnic group or a denomination.

The account in Acts of the pivotal transition which moved the church from its beginnings in Judaism across the frontiers to the Samaritans and then to the Gentiles indicates the difficulties involved. The story in Acts 10 about Peter and the great sheet let down from heaven contains within it a theological issue of gut wrenching significance. Peter was asked to eat what his tradition had forbidden him to eat. The items on the menu were theologically and gastronomically abhorrent. Peter first had to go to Cornelius; he then had to prevent Cornelius kneeling, so that the gospel could be communicated face to face with both of them standing; Cornelius and his household had to be baptised and then Peter had to explain the revolutionary thing which he had done to the church headquarters back in Jerusalem.

This escape to wider horizons had to take place because of who Jesus is, which description is given to us in the first chapter of the letter to the Colossians.

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross".

It is necessary to preach, worship and follow this cosmic Christ to which the church in various specific situations bears witness but does not control. Jesus cannot be trapped within ideology.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Christians in Ireland are, by and large, a people who believe in the Trinity. Jurgen Moltmann[vii] suggested the implications which this has for the ordering of the church and of society.

" .... the Trinity corresponds to a community in which people are defined in their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another in terms of power and possession... The Doctrine of the Trinity constitutes the church as "a community free of dominion". The Trinitarian principle replaces the principle of power by the principle of concord.... I am free and feel myself to be truly free when I am respected and recognised by others and when I for my part respect and recognise them.... Then the other person is no longer the limitation of my freedom; he is an expansion of it".

THE DOUBLE EMBRACE OF GOD'S GRACE

Miroslav Volf, writing from his experience in Croatia, maintained that it is clear what we should turn away from.
"It is captivity to our own culture, coupled so often with blind self-righteousness". [viii]

But, he asks:
"What should we turn to? How should we live as Christian communities faced today with the "new tribalism" that is fracturing our societies, separating people and cultural groups and fomenting vicious conflicts? What should be the relation of the churches to the cultures they inhabit? The answer lies ... in cultivating the proper relation between distance from the culture and belonging to it".[ix]

"The proper distance from a culture does not take a Christian out of that culture. Christians are not the insiders who have taken flight to a new "Christian culture" and become outsiders to their own culture; rather when they have responded to the call of the Gospel they have stepped, as it were with one foot outside their own culture while with the other remaining firmly planted in it. They are distant and yet they belong. Their difference is internal to the culture.

This way of defining the issues does not eliminate particularity nor does it dehistoricise people. Rather it locates people and their particular significance within wider frontiers.

Miroslav Volf explores the concept of "double embrace", based on the parable of the loving father in Luke 15. The father refused to have his identity defined in an exclusive relationship with either one of his two sons. The father did not allow himself to be trapped in acceptance of one son and rejection of the other. He loved the older boy a good deal more than most preachers manage to do. The father refused to succumb to the philosophy of the elder brother strategy of "it's either him or me". For the father, it was both at the same time.

In conformity with the grace of God churches can escape from entrapment in exclusive embraces and model a different way of proceeding, but such freedom needs to be sustained and energised by the Holy Spirit without whose encouragement the comfort zones of exclusivity seem very attractive.

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[i] A Turning Point in Ireland and Scotland? The Challenge to the Churches and Theology Today. Centre for Theology and Public Issues, The University of Edinburgh, New College, Mound Place, Edinburgh. 1998

[ii] Linden Ian The Independent 10.01.98

[iii] Volf Miroslav "Exclusion and Embrace". Abingdon 1996.

[iv] General Assembly. Annual Reports 1997. Page 18. Statement of the Church and Government Committee.

[v] "Sectarianism is a system of attitudes, actions, beliefs and structures, at personal, communal and institutional levels, which always involves religion, and typically involves a negative mixing of religion and politics. It arises as a distorted expression of positive, human needs especially for belonging, identity and the free expression of difference and is expressed in destructive patterns of relating: hardening the boundaries between groups; overlooking others; belittling, dehumanising or demonising others; justifying or collaborating in the domination of others; and physically or verbally intimidating or attacking others." Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* (Dublin; Columba Press, 2001) p102.

[vi] Gopin Marc: "Between Eden and Armageddon: the future of world religions, violence and peacemaking" Oxford University Press. Paperback to be published in September 2002. ISBN 019 515 7257

[vii] Moltmann. J. The Trinity and the Kingdom of God SCM 1981.

[viii] Volf. p 37.

[ix] Volf. p 49.