

Killaloe: Nov 27th. Listening Day of Laity. Lk 24,13-35- 2 disciples on way to Emmaus

We are on the move, we are, as Bishop Kieron said, on a journey, we are pilgrims. We learn along the way. We are not in the upper room 'for fear of the Jews' (Jn 20,19), our meeting is already a sign of readiness to change, a sign of hope.

We travel with Jesus, now with the Holy Spirit of Jesus. We ask always for a spirit of discernment, conscious that our call is a gift, not our own doing. We want to change in ways that allow us to 'put on the mind of Christ', we know our own tendencies to prejudice, self-interest and the exercise of authority as naked power, we want to be open, be Spirit-led. We want metanoia, repentance, conversion. We seek new models, new structures in this mode of disciples. We want our relationship with Jesus Christ, the saving and loving face of God, to be at the centre of what we do.

I: 'What is this conversation?' – what's the story?!

This is what we have been doing today. Telling our story – our fears and hopes, our desolations and consolations. We want, as Leonard said, to 'name our reality', and we realise the urgency of our situation. Our conversation has been rich, honest, deeply felt. I will try to reflect some of this richness back within a theological framework.

'We had hoped': that the Church would be a 'light for the nations', a kind of sacrament of Jesus Christ and God, helping us by the support of community, the celebration of worship, the service of the Kingdom. And we have been disappointed: our Church has become a dis-grace, the scandal of child sexual abuse and its mishandling has revealed deeper fault-lines – a clericalism that has been elitist, defensive and paternalistic, has ignored the talents of laity and treated them like children/dependents; an authority structure that is overly centralised and hierarchical, with scant regard for transparency or effective collegiality, for the baptismal rights of the faithful in a Church defined as the People of God; teaching on sexual morality, which despite many wonderful insights, is viewed by many of the faithful as out of touch on central issues and is honoured more in the breach than in the observance; an attitude to women that is increasingly seen as obsolete and anachronistic.

You have mentioned many of these points in our discussion today. You have spoken about the need for the reorganization of parishes; for formation of laity; the issue of young people; divorced and remarrieds with respect to Eucharistic admittance; people of a homosexual and lesbian orientation; our scant knowledge and timid application of Catholic social teaching to the socio-economic and environmental concerns which greatly burden our society and our world; the need for real co-responsibility to be exercised by laity and in particular by lay women.

I sense underneath our dissatisfaction and disappointment the kind of struggle that Paul mentions in Romans 8: the whole creation groaning, as in child-birth, struggling to bring forth something new, a new model of church. Paul speaks of hope in this context: we hope for what we do not yet see! But we have been disappointed, our hopes have been dashed, this is what we have told the stranger on the road.

II: 'He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself'- a theological interpretation re new models of church

We're not told what was the content of the interpretation of Jesus, even if we can imagine the main lines. Can we imagine what he might say to us today?

Well, it's clear he would take what we say and feel seriously: what's the story is meant! We need to give vent, it's a holy thing to do. St Augustine says that hope has two daughters: courage and anger. Part of our problem has been an unduly deferential attitude towards authority: respect is good, deference not. But it needs courage to overcome long habits of deference. Timothy Radcliffe puts it well: 'In the church there is too much silence. We bite our lips, we hold back from what we really think, keep mum. We need to have the freedom to voice our anger and suffering and pain'. And he quotes St Catherine of Sienna speaking to the Roman Curia of her day: 'Be silent no longer. Cry out with a hundred thousand voices. I see that the world is destroyed through silence'. The Murphy Report similarly referred to a culture of 'don't ask, don't tell'. Of course anger can be destructive and self-consuming: but it can also be the passionate side of love that comes up against injustice, and can galvanize us into action. It would be awful if we wasted this present crisis, if, ostrich-like, we put our heads in the sand and waited till the storm passed, hoping to return to quieter waters, if 'listening' becomes just an exercise in crisis management and not a real engagement at deeper levels, a 'being heard'. If we do this we will have missed a glorious opportunity for real change, we will consign our church to a future as an inward-looking enclave of little relevance to the world to which it was sent. And so, the listening and talking is important, is a step on an ongoing journey, is a sign of real hope.

I think he might remind us as well that, as the early church understood, what is crucial is our own need and pastoral situation as we try to be faithful to our call as his disciples. Jesus was minimally prescriptive in what he handed on to his disciples, the early church experimented with many different kinds of structures and leadership models and we need today to allow ourselves to experience something of the same kind of 'blue-sky' thinking as we try to imagine a better way forward. Our culture is no longer monarchical, or even feudal, so that even a hierarchically organized society has to reckon with the co-responsibility that the present Pope has called for and move towards appropriate attitudinal and structural change to allow the reality of church as People of God, as communion, with real fellowship of hearts and minds, to be realised. The Second Vatican Council, in particular in its decree on the Church, was a big step on the way towards this new model of church, but there was a failure in institutional embodiment – the Roman Curia continued to prefer a centralised model, the Synods of Bishops had little independence, Episcopal Conferences were given affective but not effective collegial powers, and parish councils were slow to be formed and anyway laboured under Canon 129 of the New Code which limits the decision-making authority of laity. Already within existing law and models there is of course greater scope for lay involvement at parish levels – preaching (but not homilizing), presiding over Sunday service in absence of priest, solemnizing marriages, administering baptisms and conducting funerals. But perhaps we need to go back further and down deeper: to focus again on the needs, including Eucharistic, of local communities, and to specify a whole series of shared roles, with ordained ministry at the centre but not the apex, and to re-imagine priesthood in ways that give effective witness to church as people of God. And as we move towards this new model we will surely need to consider more deeply the formation and

training requirements for different roles within the church, not to mention the financial underpinning which this will require.

And so, there is a lot of work to be done: local situations like Killaloe will lead to national, regional and universal fora – and we need the courage but also the know-how to talk through these matters with one another, with our bishop, with the Irish bishops, other conferences, the pope. Remember Paul did this with Peter, there are Remonstrances from the Irish Church to the Pope in the past! And yet, as Jesus himself was so free from the constraints of the Law and yet said he had come to fulfil it, we need to keep our ‘blue-sky’ thinking in creative tension with our past, we need to avoid throwing babies out with bathwater, we need to appreciate the need and different perspectives of both centre and periphery, we need, in short, ‘to search for better balances without damaging vital forces’ (Ladislas Orsy, 12).

I think Jesus might also remind us that we are a pilgrim people, that we are a community of sinners as well as saints, that our courage and especially our anger should never lead us to the self-righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, that we need to trust in the good faith of others including our opponents (St Ignatius: ‘It is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another’s statement than to condemn it as false’ – Sp Ex 22), that we will never live in a Gnostic, elitist church of the perfect: that, in short, the road from Emmaus back to Jerusalem may well be towards news of resurrection, but that from Jerusalem to Emmaus is due to the Cross. We live in the in-between times, eschatologically, meaning that we are in that period of already (anticipated signs of Kingdom) and not yet (wheat and tares grow together, perfection at end). And so, as Paul says again in Romans 8, our hope is for what is not yet seen, we are asked to be patient. But we are never asked to turn from repenting of evil, including sinful structures, and so, albeit with love, we need steadfastly to call all in the church to change in accordance with the intuition of Pope Pius XI in 1939: ‘I want you to take this message away with you. The Church, the mystical Body of Christ, has become a monstrosity. The head is very large, but the body is shrunken. You, the priests, must rebuild that body of the church and the only way that you can rebuild it is to mobilise the lay people’. As Paschal People we know that life can come out of death, we know historically that new models of church have come into being, we can sense that out of the ashes and dying of the present model of church there can arise, phoenix like, a new model, with our cooperation.

III: ‘He was known to them in the breaking of the bread...did not our hearts burn within us?’

The Velasquez painting portrays the servant girl rapt at the scene of Jesus breaking bread with the two disciples. A breath-taking moment of recognition, pregnant with wonder. Donal Murray notes that the two disciples had already in a sense heard the Good News (from the women) and yet this moment of encounter with Jesus, this Eucharistic moment, was what brought it to life within them, what allowed them afterwards to remember that along the way ‘did not our hearts burn within us’.

The moment of recognition and keeping it alive through meetings like this, is key. There is so much that is wonderful about church – even the disaffected can speak with warmth about key moments like marriage and funerals; there is the often hidden treasure of retreat houses and houses of spirituality, a tradition of prayer and mysticism that is rich; there is that social involvement seen in so many individuals but also in organizations like Trocaire, Caritas; there is that richness of theology, Christian thinking on core areas of meaning, including social teaching; there is the belonging at local level to a community of meaning. When we lie awake at night and wonder what life is about, when we search for meaning, the amazing belief that

there is a God, and that this God loves us so much in Jesus Christ, is a faith that is carried by the church, as a support to one another, which we celebrate above all in the Eucharist like today, and which sends us out to live lives of service, with particular care for the weak.

None of this is to deny the real problems which the church today faces and the hard thinking and great courage needed – by us, as well as others- to tackle them. But it is to locate these problems within that wonderful moment of recognition at Emmaus, that moment of wonder seen in the face of the serving girl, that moment of recognition that our hearts burned within us. In love, loving, we can do so much else. Let's continue our road, our journey, asking the Lord to fill our hearts with that fire which enflamed the disciples on the way to Emmaus.

Gerry O'Hanlon, S.J. (see also: A New Vision for the Catholic Church – A View from Ireland, Dublin: Columba Press, 2011)