

ST MARTIN'S, BELFAST

Sunday 22 November 2009

Thank you so much for allowing Maria and I to join in your local farewell to Colin. Much has changed since our first vigil for the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, since I drove our Choir across in that old minibus the following year with Brian, Eric, Dorothy Tane and Rickie – to make music with John Crothers and the Choir here, to welcome Ivan Betts and your Choir back to enjoy our St Martin's in Bradford, and the village of Haworth in the sunshine.

I am also here to remind us that our relationship matured not ended when Colin came to the Newtownards Road with the difficult task of caring for three churches and not just one, as the first Rector of the Ballymac team.

Now as we reflect back on those eleven years, there have been several more trips in either direction; but there have also been deaths on both sides of the water; Ian and Dot have left Haworth Road over major difference of opinion, Brian Holt can no longer play the organ because of his hands, John Crothers is either in Paris or in Cyprus and I have finally moved from Bradford to Islington. Now Colin is on the move too. And today – to misquote Shakespeare - I come not to mourn him but to celebrate with him, and with you.

For I cannot but say to you all today how important this small Church link has been and to plant a small sapling of an idea which I hope will go on growing for years to come, whether we are able to meet or not.

Today, in the western Calendar, we keep the Feast of Christ the King. It isn't in the Bible as such but it is an attempt, at the end of the Church's year, to place squarely before our eyes the reason why we go through all the ups and downs of life – and our Christian lives not least: because Jesus Christ is the Lord of all creation, holds everything in his hands; and it is he who sustains – and loves – all that he has made. In the famous Church by Oxford Circus where Maria and I were married, right at the top of the East Wall, is the huge, mysterious figure of Christ in glory. That is the man; that is where we are going.

But thereby hangs the tale. Who is the man – and in the context of all I have said so far, where exactly are we going?

My new Church in Islington is dedicated to St James, the apostle whose vast shrine can be found in Compostella in Spain. James has often been called the Apostle of Hope: but what is hope all about in our society today? Thomas Aquinas said that *hope was for a difficult but possible future*. For that, we need that great picture of Christ the King, reigning in glory, very firmly rooted before our eyes; he it is who gives us energy!

For we live in an age where doing things together is becoming more and more difficult. New Ageism has destroyed the idea of trying to build a collective, bright future. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, lots of people said this heralded a new chapter in our society. The great philosopher, Fukymama, shook his head and said, 'This is the end of history'. By which he meant: from now on, everyone will be seeking their own personal solutions, with instant gratification a built-in demand.

And we can point to the political evidence: fewer people voting and just up the road, the difficulties of joint solutions over policing at Stormont and the pessimism within the DUP, meeting today for its annual conference. At the Church level I guess there is a parallel too with Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in Rome this week-end, entering difficult talks with the Pope. Can bodies stick together except in a very loose fashion? Sir Martin Rees, President of the Royal Society has just written a book: *Our final century? Will the human race survive the 21st century?*

So why am I sure in my own mind that people like Colin – and others – are right to believe this is a good time to be a Christian? For here in Ballymacarrett there has been a difficult but hugely honest attempt to make plans for the Church and the Churches of East Belfast, based – or not – on Bishop Roy Williamson's review. There have been various ideas floated to convert this or that building, to work in partnership with this or that group, to start initiatives in all kinds of directions.

And, right now, you are only too aware that only a proportion of those plans have borne fruit, and so you – and I in other contexts – have to look for other ways of understanding our mission and our role; to explore the reasons why this is a good time to be a Christian.

And we can only do that when we look at the picture of Jesus and say, ‘this is the man’ and learn to be aware of the nature of the man who was God, in whose footsteps we tread. And my little sapling is the one that I think you, with Colin’s help, have been planting too as you wrestle with the two conflicting sides to Christianity which we are being invited to hold together.

For while there are always some people who would love to tell us that the right way forward is in x or y direction and we must do everything to make this or that plan work (the institutional Church if you like) we are also reminded that Jesus gave us no such consoling road map, he just gave us a story.

And that story is summed up in the last three days of Jesus’ life – from the breaking bread on Thursday to rising from the tomb on Easter Day. And you will know as well as I that – after the joy of seeing Jesus ride into the city of Jerusalem (presumably with a game plan in mind) all that crumbled away to dust at the Last Supper when Judas betrayed Jesus, Peter denied him, and Mark fled from the garden without his clothes in case he was arrested. Into that mess, Jesus simply said, *This is my body, given for you*. So that when we come to the altar in a little while to receive communion, what we are doing is recalling the time when all plans and all schemes fell apart. And just to make it a little harder still, Jesus says *For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth*.

It is at this moment that we recall our vocation, to be instruments of hope. But it seems to be God’s way to build his kingdom with the weak and the poor, and with the minimum of resources. I love the story in Exodus when Joshua, coming into the Promised Land with an army of 32,000 is told he will not defeat the Midianites until that number is reduced to 300.

In other words, we really do have to believe that the Kingdom, built in the image of the real Jesus, is founded on weakness and apparent defeat. As Rowan Williams has written, *The light is at the heart of the dark; the dawn only breaks when we have entered fully into the night.* As you have been here, so I in Islington, we have to stand in the frailty of the darkness and to see in the trials and tribulations that the pain is the fertile soil, and the only ground that will truly enable God's plans to be revealed. As Enda McDonagh has said, *Are we destined for despair or are we able to live in solidarity with one another, accompanying one another through this darkness, to whatever it is that God desires?*

Remind yourselves of how, at the Last Supper, when there appeared to be no hope, somehow the future broke into that circle, and what they longed for was given to them – at least a taste of it was. Eternity breaks in when we stop trying to find solutions and allow the timeless power of God in majesty to shine into our lives. The soldiers may have been on their way to arrest Jesus, but it was then that Jesus broke the bread and reminded them that there was more than they could see out there - but not without a great deal of trial and sorrow first.

How we itch for the zapper, for certainty, for clear cut solutions! But what you have done for me and for many others, is to live with the uncertainty, to reveal signs – albeit small signs – of the Kingdom – and to believe that holding on to hope, here and now, is the only way that the Kingdom of God can break through. To be hopeful is to live in that state of being, when something can happen. That is true faithfulness.

So Colin, so St Martin's: who knows what our future will be like? I am having a tough time in a new parish and I say all these things this morning based on real experience. But let this be our common task: in the words of Eric Hoffer: *We cannot change the world by reasonableness but by kindling an extravagant hope.* As the Dominican, Allan White, has said, *whatever plans you may formulate, be sure of one thing, God will frustrate them.*

Colin, thank you for all your service among God's people in these churches – service at no little cost to you. And thank you for helping us all to live with this vision of Christ the King who comes among us – not with a road map, but in small signs.

