

## THE CONTINUAL WORK OF WE

Matthew 10:39

Corrymeela Weekend

21 June 2020

Ruth Harvey's French is much better than mine – but her reminder that the more things change the more they stay the same speaks clearly to me. Her image of history as spiral or as a returning to something again as the people who have journeyed onward and have changed in themselves is illustrative for me right now. It is particularly so in light of the line from today's Gospel lesson (Matthew 10: 39): 'those who find their life will lose it; but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.'

### Justice and Community

Six months ago at Christmas, as I was beginning to think about what our next community weekend would try to achieve, I found myself asking the question: what would Corrymeela look like without the centre? I'm sorry it was a pandemic that has helped us find part of the answer, and in experiencing Corrymeela without the centre I want the centre to reopen all the more, but these past three months have provided some of the clarity I was hoping that initial question would provide. It gets us back to considering the movement of Corrymeela rather than the organisation of Corrymeela.

A founding member of Corrymeela mentioned something (almost in passing) to a group of volunteers a year or so ago. He was describing what held Corrymeela together before there was a Corrymeela, before the residential centre was bought, before we were gathering groups here to hold difficult conversations about sectarianism and other conflicts. What allowed that founding group to coalesce, he said, 'was the idea of justice and the realisation that we were part of an unjust society.' Even the question of who the 'we' was in Northern Ireland was instructive and defining. ... The more things change, the more they stay the same.

In the context then the injustice that was most plain to see for those earnest young Christians was the discrimination of Catholics in a Protestant-dominated state. Corrymeela was almost exclusively Protestant at that point, but influenced by Ray Davey's belief in the power of community, the power of finding God afresh and alive in the collection of people before you, including those you might label as other. The reconciling power of Christ to transform division through human encounter created a new 'we' from the group that actually is rather than from the stereotypes we imagine. And so Corrymeela sought to create community, a community that would address injustices and bring healing through welcome, by acknowledging with honesty our own brokenness, and by having the courage to trust in a new 'we' being possible.

That impulse alive in 1945 and 1965, the push that was there at the beginning of Corrymeela will be what will carry us forward in the coming years. There is again a growing realisation of the injustice we are a part of, there is a desire to bring healing through inclusive and inverted community, and there is the work to be done in relinquishing our own sense of self so as to become something new – to die and resurrect into a fuller sense of we.

### Reality and Resurrection

One of the many things that the Black Lives Matter movement has revealed to me is just how problematic the word reconciliation is. There are good, biblical, theological reasons for continuing to use that word at Corrymeela and to pursue that end in society – but they must take into account the fact that reconciliation can suggest that not so long ago there was a happy and glorious time when things were as they could be and should be again. But racial reconciliation makes no sense if it suggests a time in our own history when things were right. That sounds too much like a desire to return to a system when folks like me didn't have to feel guilty. I'm happy to continue to use the word reconciliation, but I think we need to be aware of what it can signify. I am happier in some ways using another problematic word: resurrection. I think Christians (and others) need to get a lot more comfortable with the idea that resurrection means (that it demands) that certain things/structures/systems/modes of being have to die so that the undying truth they contain can be revealed. If what we believe in is of God then we have to trust that it will live on even if what we see around us and recognise as the physical embodiment of who we are is laid to rest.

As we gather online here in this surreal time and in a sort of resurrected form, I think we can acknowledge that this pandemic has been both terrifying and clarifying. It is terrifying not only in just

how deadly and uncontrollable the disease is – it is also terrifying to see how fragile our once grand institutions and our social structures are; how gaping the discrepancy is between the haves and the have-nots. Certain populations are more vulnerable than others in large part because of faulty decisions at the core of our societies. Decisions about what we choose to prioritise, leaving social services to serve some but not all in society. This disease, this global indiscriminate disease has clarified our own discriminations and the injustices that have been there all along. But it has also clarified what is true no matter what. It clarifies the essence of what Ray Davey knew was true: that the world needs community, that human relationships are what matter and what transform us.

Community makes the difference. Kindness and empathy and shared experience and mutual learning hold people together even at a distance. It is community that carries us as we mourn; human connection that bolsters our mental and physical health; relationships that enrich our lives in ways that wealth and prestige cannot. Everything else can fade away and this will still be true.

As we look at this clarified world right now a few issues stand out: racial justice; climate justice (global problems with universal application to our individual situations); economic justice will likewise play out around the world in concrete and lasting ways as we try to rebuild justly after this pandemic. And as we look at Ireland specifically, a few things will dominate our thinking: the fallout from Brexit; the less United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; the signs of increased polarisation between nationalist and unionist identities; a paradigm shift in the political parties of the Republic; the increased likelihood of a border poll.

With all that in mind, Tim Magowan and I have been having initial conversations about where we think Corrymeela should be in the coming years. One of the first things we did was meet with Sean Pettis (he of our programme team). We discussed with him the situational context in which Corrymeela now finds itself. The guiding question we are bringing to this process is ‘what is the unique contribution Corrymeela can make in transforming division over the next five years?’ That question leads us to examine what the harmful divisions are around us and whether they are the same divisions that Corrymeela is equipped to address, what strengths Corrymeela may have as an organisation and as a dispersed community.

One fact that becomes hard to forget once you hear it is that in the last three years the number of race-motivated hate crimes has been significantly higher than sectarian-based hate crimes. (This despite BAME being a small proportion of the populace) The division of race is becoming a growing area of conflict.

Another stand out fact that Sean brought to our attention was the news to me that because of the absence of the Stormont Executive for three years there is simply no current plan for mental health services in Northern Ireland. This despite us having the highest rates of mental illness in Europe, in large part because of the legacy of the conflict. That’s extraordinary. And in light of our belief that community, that healthy belonging, that being together and sharing burdens can provide healing to traumatised people, it suggests that the need for a place and a programme that creates and hosts community will become all the more important. Trauma-informed approaches to peace-making (practices that acknowledge the effect on body, mind and soul in one’s wellbeing and in one’s ability to co-exist with others) will be increasingly important to our work.

### **Reconciliation and Relationship**

For me, these two observations bring into focus an interesting question as to how Corrymeela will engage both in the work of promoting justice and in the work of holding space for healing. Are we to be agitators in society demanding change or are we to be primarily a shelter for respite and for simply being together– or both, and how? How do we have conversations that shed a glaring light on brokenness while providing the neutral-enough comforting space needed for healing and for meeting the new we? How best to pursue both justice and healing through renewed community?

I’m not sure. And perhaps these are two distinct aspects that shouldn’t be forced together. Perhaps something more like a binary approach is the most efficient way to achieve our different goals. But I’m led to want to hold these in tension, in relationship, in a process of reconciliation. I’m also pretty sure that the answer of how to hold justice and healing together through community lies along the path of our own inner personal work of death and resurrection. Reconciliation out there often begins with reconciliation within here. Transformation in the world only happens with a transformation in the self. The impulse to do something to address injustice, we will inevitably need to address the injustice that we are guilty of, both as individuals and as a community.

As we look to provide shelter either at the centre or in our encounters with those who have been traumatised, we need to learn more about the trauma that we experience, the recovery that we each need to undergo, the need we have ourselves as individuals and as a community to look honestly at ourselves.

In order to continue as community in a COVID world, we need to abandon our self-protection and any desire to continue on in a linear way. Those we find their life will lose it; but those who lose their life for others will find it. When we let go of what we desperately want to preserve, what will appear as undying – what will remain or return -- will be a newer and truer form of what we love.

I am relatively comfortable with uncertainty. It's why I'm a man of faith. Faith assumes uncertainty for me. I expect to live in tension with unresolved and perhaps unresolvable truths. It's also why I like Corrymeela. I like the messiness of it and the uncertainty of who we are and what we're supposed to be doing. I like that it is a process and not a product, an ongoing relationship and not a determined result. If we had it all figured out and knew exactly what we should be doing – we wouldn't be in the process of reconciliation; we would be selling a product called reconciliation. As a community, Corrymeela is not meant to provide a service to those who need it because we believe we have it all figured out. As a community, Corrymeela is a relationship we commit ourselves to in which we are as transformed as much as those we seek to engage. It is a process we choose to be a part of wherever we are – a process of seeking justice and healing through community – and of continually finding the new we that represents a living 'God with us.'

### **Fear and Transformation**

I started with a founding member of Corrymeela and I'm going to end with him, too. As I understand it, one of the transformative moments for him at Corrymeela was when he rediscovered the injustice that he was a part of. He was leading a programme at Corrymeela run by members for the benefit of working class disadvantaged people. As part of Corrymeela, as one of the hosts, he inherently held power, the power of choosing to include, the power to host less fortunate folk, the power to give out of abundance rather than to receive. He could have carried on that way quite happily. But then it dawned on him that he was, in fact, the impoverished one. He was the fearful one. He was the one not allowing himself to be changed by the encounter he was having. He was the do-gooder, doing good for others. He was failing to let others have that same privilege and for a good change to come upon himself. In that realisation, he remembered that to be in community is to relinquish power continually, to allow yourself to be changed and be transformed by your encounter with others. To die and to resurrect as a new we.

These last few months have clarified for me what it will mean to become centres of peace and reconciliation wherever we live, work and worship. To be a lived community, a living community, a continuing community in a COVID world will mean reintroducing our resurrected selves in each encounter to who we are in the moment, with all our stories, experiences, trauma, and ability to change.

Let us pray:

God of uncovered secrets,  
God of fearless truth:  
to have faith in your goodness  
is to trust  
that after all we would hide  
is revealed,  
and all of our whispers are heard,  
your undying love will remain,  
and your truth will stand unchanged.  
May we forgo our protection of self,  
and find life made whole in shalom.  
Amen.