

Sermon by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby at Corrymeela's 50th Anniversary Thanksgiving Service at St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast on Sunday 1st November, 2015

It is a privilege beyond words to share in this anniversary weekend. Fifty years ago the vision and passion of Ray Davey caught the imagination of a group of young volunteers. Born out of the scars of his wartime experience in Dresden his passion and vision brought into being a community of faith that has held with great courage and hope the stories, trauma and legacy of forty years of conflict in these islands. This is an immense gift you now of the Corrymeela Community now offer to the world and to the church, which in so many places, is faced with unspeakable horror and violence.

Where the darkness of which we were just listening to in that extraordinarily powerful piece of liturgy.

Corrymeela has been since its foundation a place of welcome. In our service today, the theme of welcome has been present from the beginning and goes through to the end.

The story of the Woman at the Well opens up different concepts of what it is to be a place of welcome or a person of welcome. For many of us, welcome means greeting someone whom one knows, with whom one is comfortable, or if uncomfortable who is only going to be there for a short time. The New Testament picture is of gracious hospitality to the stranger, to the enemy and to the one who may become a commitment of love and duty as far as the eye can see.

The story of the woman at the well is an odd one. Samaria was after all for Jesus and Jews travelling a place of hostility and risk. He really shouldn't have taken that road in the first place. The disciples, clearly

deeply concerned for their own safety, had gone off in a group to try and buy food – safer than going off individually – enough of them not to feel threatened. They left their leader, tired by the walk, alone and unprotected. Those who over the years have seen people with close protection squads will be aware that to abandon your Principle in a place of danger is not generally considered to be a career-enhancing move. But Jesus does not seem perturbed.

Yet abandon him they do, and so Jesus is left by himself to be challenged, threatened or criticised by whomever comes along. And the first person to come along is a woman, herself an outcast who is evidently separated from her own community by circumstance, by reputation and by the events of her life.

She knows Jesus is a Jew, and thus the Other. Yet this woman in response to the request of this stranger she is prepared to offer him a drink of water, the basic sign of hospitality in the Middle East. She welcomes Jesus by being willing to engage with him.

The meeting has started with the routine welcome of basic and limited hospitality. It is swiftly transformed by Jesus to the welcome of hope and expectation.

And that's a crucial difference. It is possible to engage in mere hospitality that enables everyone to keep a suitable distance from each other. For example Jesus could have produced some kind of canvas bucket which could be lowered into the well so that it had not been tainted by contact with Samaritans. This sort of hospitality is better than nothing, but it is in no sense anything to do with reconciliation. The welcome of reconciliation confronts us with our own differences and our own failures, confronts the Other with the gap between us, and at the same

time offers us a way of beginning to narrow that gap and of going forward together.

Let me give you an example, current today. One of my friends is the Archbishop of Burundi, Bernard Ntahouri. Since the disputed election process that has been going on through most of this year in Burundi, many of the tensions of the terrible civil war that killed 5% of the population and that ended 10 years ago have re-emerged. As someone else said recently from Burundi, when I was speaking to them over the telephone one evening, “During the day all is normal but at night they come out and kill.” Bernard himself, as the Anglican Archbishop, was at one point a few weeks ago forced to leave Bujumbura for his own safety and go north where he could find some security. Thousands, and even tens of thousands, have fled Burundi into neighbouring states, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, itself caught up in a 20 years’ civil war.

The issue, as many church leaders have said, including Bernard, is that although there has been peace since 2005, there has been very limited reconciliation. And there is something – forgive me as an outsider. There is perhaps something of this dynamic in the on-going challenges you face here in Northern Ireland. The moment there is new pressure or new suspicions, the gaps re-emerge. Let us hold onto this: Jesus does not permit these gaps. The welcome of reconciliation is a welcome that draws together antitheses, opposites, even materials that when combined are in danger of being explosive. Are deliberately, consciously and expressly brought together by Jesus.

The welcome of reconciliation is not a soft or an easy option. It is the hard choice that you face, that your leaders face, that we face in different places in different parts of the world that I face with those who I fear or

struggle with. It is the hard choice which is a necessary part of moving beyond the politics of a peace process.

Yet the welcome of reconciliation is not merely an invitation to confrontation, but far more than that, [ADDS MORE] the danger of explosion is mitigated and dissolved through the essence of hope that Jesus pours into their combination.

Jesus says to her, “The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing out to eternal life.” The woman leaps at this, misunderstanding it at first, but moving from misunderstanding to participation in this hope as the conversation goes on.

In many expositions of this passage, the words of the woman in her discussion with Jesus are seen as trying to evade what he is saying to her by bringing up irrelevant theological points.

But these were the theological points that had kept the Samaritans and the Jews separate for centuries. Where should we worship? Is Jerusalem the only centre (for if it is, of course, then we Samaritans are almost certain to be dominated by Jewish government)? The location of Capitals, even in a dispersed and federated system, is something that sets a pattern of authority, as many in this island will know all too well.

So the issues that the woman raises are not mere messing around with theology in order to avoid personal confrontation with Jesus, but the issues that if they are not faced lead to deeper and deeper division, to the alienation and disintegration that when tolerated are the opposite of the purposes and call of Jesus Christ.

Yet Jesus does subvert and challenge her interpretation of these issues. He does not hide from truth-telling. He tells her that the revelation of God through the people of Israel is the truthful revelation. He establishes truth

and stands on it, but it is done in such a way that there is a welcome into that revelation, and an offering of light and a future through that revelation.

As we know, the result is that by the end of the story, the village turns the perfunctory and cursory welcome of the basic expected hospitality of use of the well, to the genuine engagement of residents for a few days. The villagers open their homes and their lives to the Other, to Jesus, and are transformed thereby. The subsequent mission to the Samaritans of Philip and others, as yet some years away and separated from this story by the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension and the sending of the Spirit, is put in a proper context of the work and offering of Christ.

For me, the challenge is personally huge, for our society it requires transformation on a scale that is almost unimaginable unless we catch hold of the imagination of God that Ray Davey and the Corrymeela Community have demonstrated to us over the decades.

Personally, we need to move beyond the hospitality of welcome to the hospitality of reconciliation. That means a genuine and not merely polite engagement with the Other. For many of us, such confrontation is awkward. We do not want to be faced with uncomfortable truths even by those who we know love us deeply, let alone by our enemies. Whether it is within the Anglican Communion, within our politics or elsewhere, hostility is a very painful thing to sit in the middle of. The debate in the House of Lords on Monday of last week over the issue of tax credits had an atmosphere of genuine anger and hostility. I find such encounters scarring, yet the truths put forward are human truths that needed to be heard. The welcome of reconciliation is always painful and uncomfortable, and may well leave marks and scars in our lives. The cross of Christ left marks and scars on his body, and yet achieved the

ultimate reconciliation of every human being who opens their life to Jesus.

The welcome of reconciliation means in practice encounter and listening, and is best done through communities like Corrymeela which offer an element of safety in the space. Please, keep going as a community, whatever happens around you, let the welcome of reconciliation, with all its discomfort, hold you to the path of the Cross.

But there is also a challenge for our society. In the last week, Poland has elected a government that has turned away from the outsider, a government one of whose spokesperson spoke of refugees bringing disease! In the UK, the churches' common positions on the need for welcome to the stranger and the alien has been very unpopular, and is likely to remain so. The hostility of the press was profound when 87 Anglican bishops wrote to the Government saying that in England we needed to offer refuge to more people fleeing the present conflict in Syria and Iraq.

But do we want to live in a society that retreats into itself, where 'welcome' means no more than the polite and very limited commitment of stamping a passport and then stamping it again as someone leaves within a few days. This is not a welcome that offers hope to the world or speaks of courage and self confidence in our own society.

Of course, we must be conscious of the strains on our own communities, and pay deep attention to what they are saying. But the idea that there is no solution in which we can participate to the demands of common humanity, to the opportunity to receive Jesus unexpectedly and find ourselves transformed in the encounter of the welcome of reconciliation,

in this country participating in the desperately needed process of reconciliation, is collectively absurd.

This great story of the woman at the well can be interpreted in so many ways and on so many levels. Yet at its heart is the process of transformation, of the change that comes from an encounter with Jesus Christ. There is no substitute for that, and all of us, including Corrymeela, must hold on to that sense that the welcome of reconciliation is not surrendering what we are but rather encountering definitive truth together in the person of Jesus so that we are transformed and enabled to love and to see the deep differences which mean that past tensions, conflicts and even murderous outrages can find true reconciliation in the arms and presence of God. As disciples of Jesus we are called irrevocably to be part of reconciliation, to make it happen, to bear the burden, and demonstrate the hope that none but he can break.