

Interpreting The Interpreter
Easter 6, Year C
John 14: 23-29
9 May 2010

Am I alone in dreading the words, “Now lets break up into small groups and share with each other on what I have just been talking about.” What happens next is that either the group is taken over by the garrulous whose empty heads are in direct proportion to the loudness of their voices, or else a paralysing silence descends as people wonder what the heck they can say that could be of any earthly use. But of course this is supposed to be best teaching practice on the grounds that it reinforces the points just made by getting people out of passive listening mode. One cant help noticing that it also spares the presenter the need to teach a full 50 or 60-minute module. And the depressing reality is that usually it amounts to a mutual sharing of ignorance. Why cant I have the courage of a secondary school teacher I know who as soon as he hears these words at some refresher course he has been compelled to attend just gets up and walks out?

Then there is the slavery to technology that has now taken over teaching. Power point presentations that bombard us with pretty pictures and main points, because apparently we now have the attention span of fleas, and need to be distracted wherever possible. Does no one believe in the power of words to enchant anymore, or that someone can immerse themselves in their subject to such an extent that they can make it interesting and absorbing? Which is why I refuse to call our annual in service training event clergy conference, but stick to the old term clergy school. We are not there to confer; we are there to learn. I assume that someone there knows stuff that I need to know, and that I am there to listen up and absorb it. It is a case of don't ask me – tell me!

This style of slick and shallow communication will be of more than passing interest to God, who by definition is deeply interested in what it takes to make himself known to the human race. Transmitting the essence of who he is involves getting across information, a history, and trickiest of all, a personal knowledge of his inner characteristics. Given the different levels of knowledge and understanding involved in all this it is no wonder that human misunderstanding happens in the process on a more than occasional basis.

So what is God's style of communication? One of the code words for the second person of the Trinity is the Word. He spoke a powerful word to call the creation in to being. He is the word who became flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He is the author of the words in the books we call the Bible. Since the Reformation we have been very keen in Western Christianity on making sure that people read,

understand, and hear good preaching about those biblical words. But we can overdo it. The poet Edwin Muir reflecting on some of the Presbyterian Ministers he had known in his youth said of them, "They took the word made flesh and turned him back in to words." For those words to get through in what amounts to an aha experience for us there needs to be an additional factor in play:

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.

The community for whom John's gospel was written is living at over a lifetime's distance from the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth. They are aware that both in their own ranks, and in the churches around them, there are believers who have got fragments of the truth of what Jesus said and did. These fragments need to be put together in to a coherent whole. And they are even more aware that many of their Jewish contemporaries have very much got the wrong end of the stick as to what the Christ event amounted to. They are a tough audience for an evangelistic pitch. The Johannine community needs all the help it can get in trying to get through to them. So it is very helpful for them to be reminded of the promise of Jesus that the Father would send the Advocate, the teacher plus grand, to assist them in these pedagogical challenges.

Hans Urs Von Balthasar has written that the role of the Holy Spirit is to interpret the interpreter. Jesus of Nazareth provides a life history, a personal story, by which we can catch hold of the immense richness of all that God is for us. What would otherwise be abstract and overwhelming presents itself in an accessible, interesting and engaging narrative of a life that shows us what life is all about. This is if you like Divine truth as biography. The gospels are great as compelling communication. If you don't believe me try reading the Koran as a comparison.

But still there are many who misread the gospels, and who wilfully make the story of Jesus out to be something other than it actually is. Others make honest mistakes about the gospels because they have little background knowledge to make sense of them. Enter the Holy Spirit on a mission from God to clear up misunderstandings, and to clarify and elucidate what that extraordinary life was all about. Jesus interpreted the being and intentions of God by all that he said and did. The Holy Spirit spells out what that enfleshed parable was all about. He develops the implications of what that extraordinary life means. He corrects mistaken interpretations of the life of Jesus. He does his best to guide the decision-making Councils of the Church. As we say, he leads the Church in to all truth.

So how does the Holy Spirit teach and communicate? Since the teaching office of the Church was revived at the Reformation there has

been a tremendous stress on faith as a process of cognition and volition. I hear the word, I understand it, I agree with it, my will chooses to turn it in to believing actions in my life. So far so good. But faith amounts to rather more than that.

Fergus Kerr has called us ceremonious animals. He means that we learn about the faith, and we internalise it, by moving in patterns of ritual action, by singing and chanting praise poems, by kissing and touching holy things, and by contemplating beautiful works of art that put us in touch with Divine reality. There are places and spaces, and sights and sounds and smells that speak to us of God's presence. There are significant others who convey something of the love of God just by being in their presence.

I spend half my life with my head in a theology book, and in thinking about Divine truth, but I would be the first to admit that it only gets you so far. And if towards the end of my life I lose my marbles how then will I live out a life of faith? It will be fragments of hymns and familiar prayers that will carry me through. It will be fragments of memory of Christians who loved me that will sustain me. It will be currents of feeling that I can pick up from Christians that I am in the presence of. For the truth is that we amount to much more than rationality and will power. There are vast areas of our emotional, habitual and subconscious hinterland that need to be converted. And that happens when our patterns of aesthetic appreciation, of sensuous sensibility, and of affective connection have been trained and tuned in to the subtle influences of the Holy Spirit, who aims to connect with us at every level of our being. With time and patience, and assuming our co-operation, the Advocate becomes the greatest teacher of all time who will bring us at the last to being fully informed, deeply converted Christian believers. Pray God he wont have recourse to small group methods to bring about that result in me.