

Tolerance in Contentious Areas of Community Life
24th Sunday, Year A
Romans 14: 7-9, Matthew 18: 21-35
11 September 2011

Looking down from the cross through waves of pain and exhaustion Jesus would have seen several groups before him. There were the rubberneckers and the curious out for an afternoon's entertainment at a public execution. There were the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman soldiers - the authors of his humiliating and painful death. These he had already forgiven as people who were unaware of what they had really done. And then there was his mother, John, and a handful of women and remnant disciples; the nucleus of what would become the church. Having witnessed Jesus' extraordinary act of forgiveness of his executioners the question would become whether they could now live by this charter of forgiving magnanimity as the grounding of their life together.

This view from the cross, this God's eye perspective is the one that we might like to keep in the back of our minds as we consider what Christian mutual generosity amounts to in the life of the church. Forgiveness is a big topic, but this morning's New Testament readings helpfully confine it to a consideration of what goes on in the life of the church. If that makes it more manageable it doesn't lessen the costliness of what is involved here. The punch line of the Matthew story is that a Christian who can't forgive a brother or sister in Christ thereby calls the genuineness of their discipleship into question.

Christianity assumes that Christian community is essential to develop and lead out each individual's true self, their particular specialness. But the matrix of that community life is rarely easy because it involves working, worshipping and fellowshiping with people who are often very different to oneself, and who are at varying stages of Christian and personal maturity. In the words of Jesus, "causes of stumbling are bound to arise."

In the Christian world as it existed for the first 1800 years problems of community living tended to revolve around close quarter community living. The medieval village, the New England Puritan colonial settlement, the European market town were places where everyone was theoretically Christian, and where everyone knew everyone else perhaps rather too well. The rivalries and quarrels that went on were a reflection of this somewhat claustrophobic existence. It was a surprise to learn in my recent time away that both Durham Cathedral and Wyndmonham Abbey had had their windows smashed and their interiors vandalised by rioting townsfolk who had a bone to pick with the clergy. But by and large this was a homogeneous world of sameness where Christians rowed with other Christians who had the same set of mental and spiritual furniture.

Today the challenge of Christian community living, especially at the national and international level, revolves around problems of difference. To put it simply the Christian world is becoming more and more diverse to the point where Christians often have difficulty recognising other Christians as being the genuine article. This is the issue that lies behind all the hot button issues that get all the publicity. Shall we sign up to the Covenant, shall we have partnered gay clergy, is it fair enough to have rock concerts in the Cathedral, should a Cathedral altar cloth have quotes from the Scriptures of other world religions – these are the outward expressions of an inner anguish as to what are the legitimate limits of diversity.

The question that lies behind all this is to what extent should the church accommodate itself and its faith to the surrounding secular culture in order to build bridges to it? In the latest Taonga, for instance, retired Bishop John Bluck puts in a plug for partnered gay clergy on the grounds that New Zealand society got over itself on the gay issue decades ago, and so should we. Contemporary New Zealand culture is the determining factor in what we should do. The question of what God wants on this score doesn't seem to come into it.

One answer would be to just accept the growing diversity in the Christian world, to say that we can't do anything about it, and just grin and bear it. But that is a conclusion that the church can't accept and go on being itself. The creed that we are about to get up and say is the fruit of a long struggle in the arena of the ecumenical councils to establish what is the life giving truth of the Christian faith. But in that struggle for orthodox faith charity often got lost.

Take for instance the Filioque clause in the creed. That is the bit towards the end that says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, or as the western church came to say, from the Father and the Son. This is an issue that has divided the western church from the Eastern Orthodox Church. There is a truth about God here that really matters. I feel so strongly about it that I have altered the creed so as to agree with its original wording, just as the Eastern Orthodox do. But what is really troubling about the way the dispute over the Filioque clause developed is that it became a church dividing issue as much because of disgraceful behaviour by Christian leaders as because of theological contestation. Western Christians were arrogant, and eastern Christians were obstinate, and so the body of Christ was divided.

Today theologians are close to a deeper appreciation of the issues involved in this vital issue of Trinitarian theology in a way that could lead to an overcoming of the problems involved here, and reconciliation between the churches. This patient listening, respectful dialogue and hard theological work is what should have happened in

the first place. Today the western and eastern churches are trying hard to tell each that they regret past fallings out, but will that translate into effective action to come together again when the theologians have given them the answers to bring that about. The jury is out on that.

There is an important truth about forgiveness here. Sometimes Christians and churches have to walk apart for a while because issues of Christian truth have divided them. But they should never assume that this is a natural and God given state of affairs. Always they should be looking for opportunities to restore their former unity by breakthroughs into, and theological convergences over, a deeper appropriation of the truth that underlay their former disagreements. Such a coming back together again is almost bound to involve both sides saying, "I am sorry we got it wrong to some extent."

Yves Congar was a young French catholic who was lucky enough to have grown up in a locality where he came to know Christians of different denominations in an appreciative way. Just before his ordination to the priesthood in the 1920's he decided to read the whole of St John's gospel through in a slow and meditative way as a preparation for the big day. But he got stuck on the 17th chapter, the high priestly prayer where Jesus prays that his followers will be one, just as he and the Father are one, and he couldn't get past it.

Yves Congar was ordained into a fortress church that was sure that Protestants, modernists and ecumenists were wrong. Reunion was a matter of other Christians seeing the error of their ways and coming home to mother. Despite this unpromising background Congar set out to devote his life and ministry to Christian ecumenism. His method was to go back in to the time of Christian origins in the Patristic era and to find out what new resources for the church's deepest self understanding could be discovered in its thinkers of the first few hundred years of its life. Could current Christian sticking points be outflanked from the fresh perspective of what the brightest and the best had thought in the youngest and strongest times of the church's life?

Yves Congar would know many difficult days. Perhaps the hardest time was when Pius the twelfth aimed a papal encyclical at him in the late 1940's, and placed his theological writings on the critical watch list. But he stuck it out in deep loyalty to his church to become the father of catholic ecumenism, and to see many of his insights vindicated at Vatican 2.

Out of his life time commitment to Christian reunion came a remarkable and hope filled perspective on the challenge before the churches. Yes, his own church had the fullness of truth in as much as any church had it at present. But the fullness of catholic truth in

its most complete and God desired form was something that the churches were working towards and were growing into. This plenitude of truth was a goal that the churches would arrive at in a reuniting form as they rethought their dilemmas, and prayed and desired and loved one another into this destination point. To be catholic in its fullest sense was something that Christians had to look forward to, and they had better get off their backsides and do what was required to make it happen.