

HOMILY FOR FEAST OF THE BIRTH OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST PROVINCIAL CHAPTER - 24.06.16

I first engaged with the figure of John the Baptist when I was reading Albert Nolan's book *Jesus Before Christianity*. You may have read it too? It was a really powerful and mind-shaping book for me, published forty years ago now. Nolan asks the question 'who really is Jesus of Nazareth - this man?' What kind of a person was he? It's the man-Jesus he's after, the human Jesus - a low Christology, starting from below, not from above with the doctrine of him as Son of God

Nolan says that one way you know who a person really is is by who they associate with, what they identify with - who are their friends, what causes do they support (... whether you're for Brexit or Remain - it tells you a lot). And he says that what we see Jesus identifying with when we come across him for the first time as an adult - now a mature man - is with John the Baptist and with his message. He throws his weight behind what the Baptist was doing, and then accepts baptism from him in the Jordan.

So the first move Jesus makes in his public ministry is to follow John's line - promoting his movement, his call for a deep seated renewal of Israel, preaching a message of penance, conversion, justice, transformation. And Jesus adopts John's own headline message: 'Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is close at hand' (Mt 3:2; Mark 1:15). They have this core proclamation in common.

Now Jesus, of course, will unfold the message rather differently - and John eventually defers to him, as the one 'whose sandal straps I am not worthy to undo' (John 1:27). John's style is the Old Testament prophet; his preaching is in the classic form, calling to justice; he issues a strong moral challenge. But with Jesus other images and appeals come to the fore - the inexhaustible love of God, the beatitudes, God's mercy and forgiveness. It's not that he abandons or sidelines justice, but he re-sets it as *God's* justice. Cardinal Kasper explains this in his great book on *Mercy*, that while for us humans justice and mercy are in tension - mercy must be brought in to temper justice - this is not so in God. Mercy, Kasper tells us, is quite simply the form God's justice takes.

It's revolutionary! It's what we're celebrating this the Holy Year of Mercy. And it's really the same, or very close to the intuition of Paul of the Cross - that the Passion of Jesus has to be read as a work of love. It's the form divine love takes; it reveals and is the greatest demonstration of God's inexhaustible love.

Jesus made this - God's love - the heart of his proclamation; this *is* the Good News. This blew wide open John the Baptist's movement of renewal and transformation. What Jesus was seeking, following John, was to infiltrate the religion of Israel with a radically new vision of the God they already believed in and worshiped. It wasn't a new religion, but the religion of Yahweh made radically new.

Paul of the Cross is on something of the same path. His intent was to foster a new spiritual current in the church of his time, a new awareness. He - and we - seek to promote a recovery of the life-giving memory of the Passion. We're not so much a new institution in the church - the memory of the Passion is at the heart of the whole church's life; we exist as a call to the church to re-discover its deepest roots. This is to work for a human and spiritual awakening. We work to renew the church - and indeed society at large - by coming alive to the deep blessing, God's love and Mercy, that resonates in our hearts.

I think we're likely to make more progress in Province renewal if we think of ourselves in terms of this kind of dynamic - of being in service of a movement of renewal and deep transformation, and if we can catch the urgency of it. We need to see ourselves as a quicksilver dynamic running through the church, rather than just another one of the church's established institutions. We're not institutional people; we live out of the wellsprings of the charismatic impulse that seized Paul of the Cross.

Of course, this mission, this service cannot be offered from a distance. Promoting the memory of the Passion, as our Constitutions make crystal clear, implies being in solidarity with people and situations where the Passion is a raw living reality. The rawness may be internal to ourselves as persons - our burden of suffering, often a crushing burden. It's the rawness of our suffering as communities facing diminishment and decline, the raw suffering of brokenness as a result of the scandal of abuse. It's the raw suffering of those who come to us for ministry; the suffering of the too many whom we pass by on the other side.

We understand well enough that these realities evoke a response of empathy. But solidarity is more than empathy. The challenge came home to me in a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Kasper's book:

Suffering has to be endured in order that it may pass away. Either the world must bear the whole burden and collapse beneath it, or it must fall on Christ to be overcome in him. He therefore suffers vicariously for the world. His is the only suffering which has redemptive efficacy. But the Church knows that the world is still seeking for someone to bear its sufferings, and so, as it follows Christ, suffering becomes the Church's lot too and bearing it, it is borne up by Christ. As it follows him beneath the Cross, the Church stands before God as the representative of the world. (*The Cost of Discipleship*, 81-82)

Solidarity means *com-passion* – suffering with.

Now, this often seems to me to be too much of a burden to bear. But the point is that in faith we see *through* the Cross and *beyond* the Cross to a new kind of hope. It's in that hope – not wallowing in suffering – that Passionist life takes its stand. For me, it's symbolised in the verse from Philippians, from the kenotic hymn, with which we begin the hours of the Office. But we take the hymn up in the second part – after its reference to Christ's death on the Cross – and we proclaim that we and every tongue confess Jesus Christ as Risen Lord.

May that proclamation which we make day by day guide us in the years ahead.

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