

24 Pentecost – 15 November 2009 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

It has come to my attention that there is a deep and ongoing conflict within our midst. It is a conflict that has manifested itself in several ways. And yet it is a conflict without apparently any ideological, theological or sociological basis. But conflict there is, and thanks to the redoubtable Valley News barely a day goes by without at least one story or letter to the editor adding yet more fuel to the fire. In case you hadn't guessed it, I am referring to the conflict that seems to pervade the town of Norwich. Whether it is a question of a bandstand or a town sign, a cycle path or a traffic camera, a picture of a witch on a broomstick at Hallowe'en or the use of a town listserver, the Norwich of the Valley News is place of seemingly endless dispute. And the days when there isn't a story in the paper about Norwich are so much less entertaining.

Before I go any further I should point out to any Norwich resident listening that I rather like Norwich. I certainly don't have a brief against the place. Without exception all the Norwichians who I know on a personal level are decent, upstanding, and quite wonderful people. Despite the fact that Hanover is set on something of a hill looking down on slumbering Norwich I would be devastated if anyone thought that Hanover occupied a particularly higher moral plane.

Quite the contrary. A case could be made for the idea that Norwich occupies an important social space in the Upper Valley. Here after all is a town where some of the smallest things can become the biggest things, a place where popular debate can be had at the drop of a hat. In short, a place not unlike the world of the Early Church.

The Early Church was a contentious group of a people living in a constantly changing period of history. It was not an easy time to be living, far less to be working out the implications of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And while we may be tempted to look back through rose-tinted

spectacles at the centuries before the great division of Christendom into Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, the Early Church was not a period of universal harmony. Quite the reverse.

And so when we read apocalyptic warnings regarding the end of time in the scriptures one can understand that these were not simply abstract ideas for the Early Church. The wars and rumours of wars in our Gospel reading were not unheard of for them. And the idea that Christ would return imminently in the Second Coming had a powerful grip on the first several centuries of the Christian community. Within such a context it seemed natural to turn back to texts like Daniel in which a time of social anguish is contrasted with the arrival of one who can deliver the people from all the hardship around them. The same is of course true for us. In our own age of wars, terrorism, global warming, high unemployment, and economic difficulties we also need to hear words of comfort.

The thing about biblical comfort, though, is that it is forged out of an honest and informed view of all that is wrong. Comfort can only happen within a context of conflict and discord. Biblical comfort is not a form of theological sugar-coating. Rather, God's power to comfort emerges in partnership with God's ability to lay bare what is happening in the world. Truth is a precondition of divine comfort, which means that conflict is often the most powerful manifestation of divine love. For in conflict we see the truth both of who we are and also of who we have yet to become.

On the other hand, there is a difference between conflict that draws us closer to truth and the military and interpersonal conflicts that so often erase any meaningful possibility of truth-telling. In the heat of battle or in the heat of an argument there is a certain kind of truth. But it is not the whole truth, and it is not the type of truth that forges reconciliation and peace.

By contrast, for the writer of the letter to the Hebrews the conflict that ultimate draws us together and creates harmony is a Christocentric kind of conflict. Christ is depicted as the high priest who allows all sin to be set aside, and who frees us from the endless cycle of victimhood and recrimination. Whether one adopts the letter of this argument, or whether one follows the spirit of this letter, it is clear that in the conflict created by Christ there is distinctive purpose. In his life and death, and in his conflict with power and authority, Christ decisively refutes the need for future conflict or future sacrifice.

Gathering as we do so close to Veteran's day and the terrible news to come out of Fort Hood we do well to remember those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in their blood. And it is right that a country and a world should remember the service and the sacrifice of those who have fought to defend the freedoms that all of us take for granted. At the same time, we do the dead an injustice if we believe that the cycle of conflict and sacrifice is somehow inevitable or an eternal part of the divine will.

It would be unorthodox to say the least to suggest that God desires war and military conflict. God is very much against war and armed aggression. Time and time again the scriptures remind us that God yearns for peace and reconciliation. And in Christ God has shown us a way forward that can decisively break the endless cycle of aggression and conflict.

In these weeks before the start of Advent the Church asks us to stand in a liminal place. A place anticipated by scripture, but a place that none of us have seen. It is above all a place where we truly open our hearts and minds to the reality that God's forgiveness will break in on us. When the Early Church debated and disagreed about the meaning of Christ's incarnation or the nature of the Trinity, there was one thing they were agreed upon. They agreed that in Christ we are given a new way not just of understanding God, but of understanding our relation to one another.

It has taken a couple of thousand years but I believe the church is beginning to realize that the truth of God is increasingly bound up with the truth of our relationships. If we worship a God of forgiveness and are not able to forgive what does that say about our theology? And if we celebrate a God who promises to end conflict but are reluctant to set disagreements aside what does that say about our spirituality?

As our church year draws to an end, now is the perfect time for us to take stock and ask ourselves some serious questions. And some of those are going to be uncomfortable. It strikes me that the idea of Christ setting aside and forgiving sins is one of the most glorious and comforting ideas in the history of the world. But it is absolutely meaningless if as individuals we cannot identify within ourselves what those sins might be. What is it that Christ forgives for us? Until we can answer that, how can we possibly be expected to forgive others? And until we have learned how to forgive wholeheartedly we will never learn how to truly provoke others to love and to good deeds. What we need in Norwich and what we need in Hanover and Lyme and the rest of the Upper Valley is not less provocation. But a Christ-like provocation in which we put pressure on ourselves and others to be Christ-like. For where we are able to exercise Christ-like forgiveness and love, there we all make God real once again. Amen.