

NB Strict Embargo : 17 October at 7 pm

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

*Lecture in Guildford Cathedral
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GLOBAL AND LOCAL TRENDS

Historians enjoy the privilege of allocating to periods of the past labels which identify a particular trend or characteristic. They talk about periods of revolutions, periods of conflict, periods of nationalism and frequently they designate social and cultural change as dominant factors of a period of history.

I believe there is a strong argument for designating these days in which we live in terms of the nature of communities, the nature of relationships – the coming to terms of how we regard human relationships between differing political, religious, cultural and ethnic groups. I also believe this is true on the global as well as the local scene.

What is the real nature of community conflict? What are the main causes of community conflict? How are they resolved?

What I want to do in this lecture is to examine just some of the ingredients which seem to be common to the resolution of those conflicts and how they relate to the notion of community building.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Naturally those considerations lie close to my own life and experience as a Church leader in Northern Ireland. In a sense this has to be my starting point.

This evening my homeland faces yet one more political crisis with the suspension for various reasons of the power-sharing Assembly and Executive. Since the *Belfast Agreement* established a structure involving unionist and nationalist politicians what is known as the 'peace process' has moved from one challenge to another. The current crisis stems chiefly from the complaint that one section, the Republican movement, has failed to deliver the end of paramilitary threat and existence while occupying a significant place in government. That is a bare statement of fact. Behind it lies the greater element or question of a total breakdown in trust between participants. Trust – that fragile ingredient in any agreement – has been shattered on both sides. Republicans do not trust the intentions of unionists and unionists do not trust republicans because of the continued existence of paramilitary activity, in particular the IRA. In the face of this breakdown the long suffering law abiding people of Northern Ireland now enter a period of direct rule from Westminster.

Let me say straightaway that so much has been achieved in recent years in Northern Ireland. Here in England you could be excused for believing that nothing has changed. The traditional picture of Protestants engaging in an age-old conflict with Roman Catholics and vice versa, the traditional picture of a religious struggle, a religious war is a complete contradiction of the reality of the current situation. Of course there are interface areas where sectarian hatred continues to dominate and violence can erupt between Protestants and Roman Catholics. But what has now emerged is another dividing line : it is the line between those who want democratic political solutions to our problems and those who still maintain that violence is the only way to achieve political objectives.

You will continue to read of outbreaks of violence in certain areas where Protestants and Roman Catholics live close to each other. But more and more those local conflicts are being identified in terms of loyalist or nationalist, loyalist or republican. Of course history will

long remind us of the close proximity of religious and party political identities. But I believe it is of great significance that our society has moved in vast ways of late so that this evening I can speak of the divisions irrespective of religion between democracy and violence. It may seem a contradiction of experience that this *'new division'* supercedes the sectarian divisions of which you are all aware. But I firmly believe we have moved into a new yet to be clearly defined division – and that must surely be welcomed.

Sectarianism – the naked face of hatred – remains the core problem in Northern Ireland. But I also believe that the signs of the time are a new reality which must be encouraged – and that new reality is between violent means of change and genuine democratic dialogue.

The Churches of Northern Ireland have found themselves to be an integral part of the long-standing differences in the Province. Given the overlap of religion and party political identities such a role is inevitable. However I have to plead for recognition of the vital ongoing role as advocates for reconciliation for the Churches. In periods of political vacuum Church leadership finds itself drawn into the role of spokespersons for their communities. This is a serious and responsible role which we take seriously. But it contains the ever-present danger of re-enforcing the link between politics and religion. It usually raises questions such as : *are the Churches part of the problem or part of the solution?* I usually respond by saying that if they are part of the problem they **must** be a part of the solution. The only guarantee of impartiality is to speak *'the truth in love'* and to speak and act without fear on the basis of a Gospel of love and reconciliation. It also has the awesome prospect of finding oneself drawn into community roles which are far from what traditional training for the Ministry ever envisaged. In my own case I think of meeting paramilitary leaders some years ago to help the negotiation leading to the ceasefires, being asked to chair community forums where disputes have arisen, meeting community activists where whole communities have found themselves in conflict and encouraging such bodies as the Loyalist Commission where paramilitaries meet with representatives of the Churches to develop dialogue rather than violent action.

As you know the Secretary of State has suspended our local power-sharing arrangements earlier this week. There are many reasons for this development. Let me say this evening that we must distinguish between this development and the wider implications of the 'peace process'. The work of understanding, bridge building and reconciliation must grow stronger in relation to this situation. I have recently appealed for a new awareness of the 'big picture' – that vision which is far beyond the political niceties of this recent development concerns the lives of ordinary decent law-abiding people 'on the ground'. That must surely be the priority. It is to that understanding that for the past 17 years I have dedicated my Primacy in Ireland.

LOCAL LESSONS - WORLD APPLICATION

Now I said at the beginning that I wanted to say something about the generalities which have emerged in my experience of conflict resolution and community building. The lessons I have personally learned in Northern Ireland and elsewhere I believe can apply to any situation of community conflict.

To put it plainly – change the labels and you have any community conflict you care to mention anywhere in the world.

Colour, creed, ethnic or cultural identity – conflict can and does arise, community building demands answers.

On a visit to South Africa before the fall of apartheid and years ago during the civil rights movement in the southern states of America I saw Northern Ireland under a different label.

We are moving into a United Kingdom which is struggling to become a pluralist society. New communities are rapidly growing and as they grow tensions can and do arise. We all know how easily those difficulties emerge. Pluralism is coming of age in these islands. It poses immense possibilities for a process of maturity in this country – but it also contains much of which we need to be aware. *How prepared are we as a society to welcome the growth of religious, faith communities or political entities which are basically different to our own? To what extent are we prepared to change to encourage*

accommodation? Are there limits to accommodation? How much of pluralism depends on change?

What sort of leadership is required in a community to encompass diversity? How far ahead of opinion can leadership go without losing a following? How do we approach different interpretations of what constitutes justice? At what point does any community lose its genuine identity through a failure to greet diversity?

The questions are innumerable. The risk of ignoring the questions can be community chaos.

What then are the key steps we must recognise?

NATURE OF A COMMUNITY

First, we need to ask about the nature of a community.

What makes the ideal community?

As an Anglican I recognise the value of diversity. Difference does not have to be a sign of weakness or despair. It **can** be a sign of strength. What really matters in any community is our **attitude** to diversity, our attitude to others. *Can it be tolerance and respect or must it be suspicion and tension?* In my own work I have seen both those scenarios at work.

Is it to be a collection of opposing factors where tension exists but is unchallenged?

Is it to be a place of accommodation or a place of unending conflict? There will always be those who rejoice in conflict. Their agenda has got to be met by a stronger will to build understanding.

May I presume to suggest from my experience that the first and primary essential is understanding through knowledge.

What is it a community stands for? What is it that that community feels most seriously about? How far do the aspirations of a

community remain untouchable – and how far are those hopes open to negotiation?

I have seen the tragedies which come from a failure to understand those who oppose each other. In plain language there is a place for listening before speaking. Sensitivity is the key word.

PATIENCE

Second, we need to recognise the role of patience in any resolution of community differences.

In the case of Northern Ireland reconciliation is not a matter of changing attitudes of the last dozen years. It is a process of changing the attitudes of generations. There is no 'quick-fix'. It is the long haul which demands patience, listening and probing. It is above all else the process of never losing hope. Remove hope of a resolution – and all will be lost. There will be setbacks – it is how we face them that matters.

MOVEMENT

Third, we must recognise the possibilities for movement.

In my experience of community division one must never be surprised or unprepared for movement. When least expected it is amazing how quickly a situation can change. The approach I received from paramilitaries to intervene and conduct negotiations came at a time when it seemed a total stalemate existed. *On a wider canvas who could have believed the sudden turn of events in a divided Germany years ago or the breakthrough in South Africa?*

TRUST

My fourth principle concerns that fragile element we call trust. Easily achieved – just as easily destroyed. But it is a total pre-requisite for agreement – even for working together.

It is trust which is lacking between the political parties in Northern Ireland at present. Trust of word, trust of action, trust of motive.

But I want to speak now of the relationship between what we have discussed to what I always call '*the faith pilgrimage*'.

INCARNATION

The Churchman who approaches inter-community difficulties **should** start with an advantage over any other agency. We ought to start from the point which speaks of basic understanding of human nature in the light of the Incarnation. That Incarnational experience ought to give us a base for negotiation and understanding which already takes us to basic rapprochement with '*fallen humanity*'. It means we think of the '*divine possibilities*', the role of forgiveness and the strength of redemption.

MEMORY

Memory is one of the most under-rated human characteristics in community affairs. We are what our memories make us to a large extent. In my own situation at home memories are what dictate the parameters of social progress., Memories of past hurt, past injustice (real or imagined) and memories of the past fracture of trust. How we deal as individuals with memories and how we translate that process on to a community basis is vital to any community bridge-building.

In South Africa the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an example of one way of dealing with painful memory. It is not a method that can be immediately translated into another geographical context, but it is always worthy of mention. I have seen a good deal of its work and I believe it helps us all to understand that without that degree of trust which comes from facing memories progress towards social or community accommodation is difficult. Every day I live I am reminded in some form or other of the corrosive power of negative memories.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is in short supply in Northern Ireland. We have had wonderful examples of individual acts of forgiveness. But to ask an entire community to express forgiveness of another is sometimes a '*step too far*'. In the Christian sense the simple words '*I am sorry*' are

a powerful step in reconciliation. They demand a response even if that response is to ignore the plea.

Forgiveness between people in any estrangement is easy to define even if difficult to encourage. The problem in inter-community relations is the complexity of what makes up a community. It is an entity of individuals all with their opinions. Even if some are in favour of an expression of forgiveness to another group you will never gain unanimity. There is also the question of attitude. In Northern Ireland to suggest one community needs to seek the forgiveness of another is to be accused of some form of surrender. Forgiveness can be interpreted not as strength but as weakness. Some time ago I stated in public that the community to which I ministered ought to seek the forgiveness of others. My post bag and telephone soon indicated how many accused me of *'betrayal'*. Nevertheless I remain convinced that vicarious community expression of guilt has a vital place in reconciliation.

What I have tried to address this evening constitutes one of the greatest challenges to any Christian who seeks to live out their faith in contemporary society.

NEW TESTAMENT INSIGHT

Perhaps I may end with reminding you of a profound yet simple episode from Christ's challenge to argumentative human kind.

Do you remember the argument between his disciples about identification with his mission? In fact what they were asking was how they could become part of his community.

"What do we have to do to be like you?"

Not perhaps the answer they expected. Not an assurance of a spiritual insurance policy to paradise.

"If you would be like me – deny yourselves, take up the cross and follow me."

No safe road out of their differences. But a dusty road to the Cross.

Yet already the first dawn of Easter morning was beginning to be a possibility.

Reconciliation and community building is for me like that. We need to suffer and risk misunderstanding along the road if those with whom we walk are to find that agreement which is in the power of God to grant ...

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