

THE CHURCH OF IRELAND MENS' SOCIETY

Address given on March 6th 2010 by the Right Revd Michael Jackson, bishop of Clogher

INDIVIDUAL, PERSON AND COMMUNITY - a few suggestions

‘The longing for individuality, the pressure to conform; the fascination with the will and the reduction of the will to choices in the market: these are some of the knottiest tangles in our contemporary world. And to understand them fully, perhaps we need a bit more theology than we usually think about. The Russian Orthodox writer, Vladimir Lossky, based much of his theology around the controversial claim that we need to distinguish with absolute clarity between the individual and the person: the person is what is utterly unique, irreducible to a formula, made what it is by the unique intersection of the relationships in which it’s involved (and this is obviously grounded in what we believe about the ‘persons’ of the Holy Trinity, about the way *God* is personal); but the individual is just *this* rather than *that* example of human nature, something essentially abstract.’

So argues the archbishop of Canterbury in an interesting short book entitled: *Silence and Honey Cakes* (pages 52, 53)

As you might well imagine in the work I do from day to day, I am faced not so much with problems in the abstract but sooner or later with the faces and the voices of other people. Whether it begins with a letter, a phone-call or an e-mail – there is always behind it and within it the face of someone who knows me, and whom I myself probably know. And so, I am constantly presented with the points of entry into and out of both the big picture and the personal impact. The personal experience is almost always of greater importance to the person concerned than the broad canvas, as is to be expected. Somehow, it is usually the case that the person in question cannot see his or her face in that bigger picture and feels frozen out. I imagine that every one of us here has felt something of this sense of being squeezed out and we would probably say that we feel it *personally*.

LENT – FINDING IN BEING FOUND BY GOD

The distinction which Archbishop Williams is making above takes us to the heart of the Season of Lent in which we find ourselves annually. Lent is about many things but, in my book, it always has to have the radical component of *finding yourself in being found by God*. The re-integration of the person with other persons requires the recognition that something is broken and needs to be fixed; it also requires the recognition that this cannot be a solo effort but demands respect for community. As lone individuals, we become broken off from a community. Often it begins to happen for the simplest and strangest of reasons. We would prefer a night in on our own. We were not all that fussed the last time we were out with that group of people. There is a new rector and I’m not quite sure of him yet; let’s just wait and see how he turns out. We let ourselves become separated from the community for whatever reason and, for the moment, we feel an exhilaration of freedom and a release from the irritation caused by others. But as time goes by, re-integrating with them becomes less attractive and a lot more difficult. The archbishop makes the point that an individual is much more easily picked off by outside influences; a person is part of a community and therefore is defined by relations and relationships. Again, admittedly, this is often more easily said than done. Relationships are hard work! Community points us towards something beyond ourselves – other people – and something within ourselves - God the Trinity. The archbishop,

with that strange combination of comfort and discomfort, shows us the stark distinction between the individual and the person and it is a useful reminder as we enter deeper and deeper into the Season of Lent.

In Lent last year I was with a group of pilgrims from my own diocese in the Holy Land. On one of the days we were at the Mount of Temptation just above Jericho. We did not take the mountain path but went by cable car. From the monastery, the views of the valley were breath-taking; we somehow felt monarchs of all we surveyed - a dangerous feeling in the wake of the Temptation of Jesus and on that particular mountain! We made final preparations for the celebration of Holy Communion at the monastery where, from the fourth and fifth centuries, hundreds of monks had lived in community. But my eye could not fail to be drawn to the other mountains around us where monks had carved out in the rock individual caves to which they would have withdrawn to pass Lent, and other periods of the year I can only presume, *solo*. The realization of spiritual warfare was tangible. This reality on the part of persons living in community with Jesus Christ brought with it privations of comfort, cleanliness, sanitation, food, water, companionship which tested the body to breaking-point in the service of service itself. Please do not get me wrong – contemporary Lent is not a cosy place or a cosy thing. And let us also remember that Church of Ireland people still make room and time for Lent – with midweek services on Wednesdays perhaps and serious efforts being made for the totality of Holy Week and Three Hours of meditation on Good Friday. The wilderness is no ballroom of romance. It is as close to hand and as punishing in an Irish suburban semi-detached house today as it was in the stark wildness of Biblical Palestine. It is as alienating today as ever it has been. Searing and searching loneliness still stalk our streets and psyches. Idealism and inadequacy still tear us in opposite directions. The battle between the individual and the person continues – and without a doubt it always will; and so does spiritual warfare.

WHOM TO SERVE IS PERFECT FREEDOM

I want to explore with you this afternoon a seed-thought from within our own tradition of prayer – something which we could so easily gloss over because it is so meek, so unassertive and so obvious. It is this: ...*whom to serve is perfect freedom*. As a society we have become rather bored by and impatient with the meek, the unassertive and the obvious. This is a mistake because it is words and concepts, people and actions, like this which give stability and perspective in stormy circumstances. Had we been writing this prayerful sound bite today we might well have written instead: ...*whom to choose is perfect freedom*, so easily are we now swayed by every wind of fashion in our worshipping and in our praying. There is a volcano lying just below the surface in our thought-pattern: freedom of choice, freedom to make choices have pushed very firmly to one side an understanding of freedom that truly releases - freedom from having to choose. We are deeply individualistic and deeply conformist at the same time – we want to know that we have made our choices ourselves while in the same breath the market is driving us towards predictability and conformity all at once. In the chilling words of the archbishop – a memorable sound bite – ‘advertising standardizes our dreams.’

In this realm of options, religion is tolerated, indeed can even be encouraged, because it widens the range of the market. We also have rather antique philosophy, post-modernism, to thank for this. We hear more and more the language of religion used in quite secular contexts in which it is so far removed from its meaning as to be evacuated of content. The first of

these was: *mission statement* and we are now so comprehensively chasing our tails that almost every parish and diocese needs a mission statement as well as every brand and business. More and more keep trickling out all the time. Over the past year I have been exploring a theme with my own clergy entitled: Hand Luggage Only. Indeed Dean Rooke was strategic in helping us to do so. My purpose in this was not to encourage the clergy to surf the Net for cheap deals on holiday destinations but to encourage them to think about essentials and to cut back on the clutter which inevitably piles up in parochial life and commitments. ...*whom to serve is perfect freedom* is part of the same way of thinking. The greater maturity is not in having the most choices available but in making fewer choices and so freeing oneself from the dead-weight of self-consciousness and self-absorption, from choice itself as the conservatory of self-image.

JESUS CHRIST - PATTERN AND APATHY

In Lent, the pattern is Jesus Christ and particularly the Jesus of Gethsemane is helpful in understanding this type of freedom. For the human Christ, his identity is so completely bound with God the Father that there is no choice and in a sense no purpose to choice. This is an extreme position but I am seeking to express somehow the desire of Jesus to fulfil the will of his Father to the full. We are all very good at domesticating Jesus, at building a picture of a Jesus who sits beside us on the sofa or in the passenger seat. Regularly – and in particular when we run into difficulties – we need a tougher and a bigger picture of Jesus. Out of this, perhaps, comes that much misunderstood doctrine of the early Church *apatheia*/emotional freedom from suffering which not only was understood to be a feature of Jesus Christ but was also an ideal of the follower of Jesus Christ particularly as monasticism – both communitarian and solo – began to take off in the fourth century although the development of the doctrine starts at least with Clement of Alexandria in the second century. Apathy in this understanding is not callous lack of feeling but something quite different – a freedom to be, a sense of purpose beyond the sense of the senses. It is what remains when there is nothing else and in the Christian faith what remains is not a nothing but the fullness of being in God. This recognition is deep within the call of the desert. This is the imitation of Christ. This is the awareness deep down in our spirit that our heart is restless until it finds its rest in God. Today's world offers us so many invitations to restlessness that we ought really to grasp the purple Seasons of the Church's Year - Advent and Lent – to inhabit this desert, to be embraced by the openness, to enjoy the colours and to smell the wildflowers which are to be found in the desert and not to be defeated into thinking that desert means nothingness. Read Isaiah; listen to the Baptist's cry; walk with Jesus - and you will find new life in desert places. And please do this everywhere – in your back garden, when you are out for a walk, when you are sitting quietly – let yourself be and please do not always be driven by the thirst to do.

IDENTITY

I do not want to give you the idea that individual identity is a wrong thing. Knowing who you are, what you stand for, why you stand there – these things are vital for the personal fulfilment which enables us to contribute with confidence in a spirit of community belonging. But in Northern Ireland we are not yet good at this and the dean of Armagh, through his sterling work with others in The Hard Gospel Committee and Project, can attest to this. Our minds echo with phrases like these: But what about ... or: Hold on a minute ... or: Do you not remember... or even: How could you possibly forget ... I say this not in order to be cross

with anyone for the best of what he or she tries to do, but to point us all to the need for a new moral framework rooted in the requirement of repentance and the assurance of restoration. Somehow, our lack of confidence in the repentance of others has left us suspicious of their entitlement to restoration. Naivety in this area of life is wide open to exploitation by those of evil intent – of course. But the record of churches *per se* in offering pathways of restoration is somewhat dismal. Somehow we are blocked at the point where bad people get a fresh start – we are less than sure about that. An open-eyed reading of Scripture, however, shows us people who are bad – the Prodigal Son - becoming good, people who are destructive – Peter and Paul - becoming missionaries, people who are murderers – Moses and David – becoming ambassadors of truth. We carry contradictions both in who we are and how we do it. We retreat far too often behind closed door for fear of the world – we need to stop doing this.

PATHWAYS, CONVERSION AND TRANSFORMATION

There are many pathways to mature Christian faith and action. In our own tradition, some people have been Anglicans all their lives. Some have come into the Church of Ireland by a variety of routes. Others have been converted to Christianity and, after a degree of experimentation, have found themselves at home in the Church of Ireland. This diversity is part of who we are. The important thing is that we keep a balanced perspective and do not create a hierarchy of religiosity whereby someone else's expression of faith is second class or third class compared with mine and with that of those of whom I approve. I make a simple observation - more and more I see people who are 'stuck' at the point of conversion. I think that this derives not so much from a willingness to be stuck there but from a loss of nerve in giving flesh to the bones of new life in Jesus Christ or from a desire to see certainty before any other steps are approved or taken. Increasingly we see movement across denominations – and we panic. But: should we and in any case what is the point? Maybe, were there to be a more united witness, maybe, were the churches to spend a little longer listening to what we are all saying, there might be scope for an understanding of differing emphases within the same narrative of salvation. The we might be a little less twitchy about change and the authority it bestows.

If we still emphasize too heavily conversion, we emphasize too little transformation. And this is where I return to service and freedom. If grace is to triumph over merit – and all the signs, God be praised, are that it does – then we need to add to the idea of conversion the idea of transformation. It is surely one of the glories of our Church Calendar that the Transfiguration can be marked and owned for the Season of Lent as well as for its own Day on August 6th. It would be useful and fruitful to view the Season of Lent not so much as a time of effort which is bound to fail but as a period of transformation through transfiguration. The divine freedom which is the freedom of Jesus, because of who he is, transforms us in such a way that what he does becomes a sort of second nature to us. In this way, the imitation of Christ has a new life and, if I may adapt a phrase from another way of thinking, a fresh expression. The person of Christ becomes our person. And so, as well as rejoicing in words like growth, numbers and development, we need to face honestly words like disintegration as ways of enabling new life to come through. If we take into our Lenten journey the whole person of Jesus Christ – the years in Galilee, the times in the wilderness, the agony of Gethsemane, we see a community - and indeed a series of communities - which forms around him and which through him is taught to serve everyone without favour. Things shift and change significantly at the foot of the Cross of Calvary in that there is a new community of women and very few of the original disciples. As the old community – transformed – gathers again on the day of resurrection they

are told by St Mark not to look in the wrong place: *But go and say to his disciples and to Peter: He is going ahead of you into Galilee: there you will see him, as he told you.* We are, in a powerful way, pointed towards transformation as a definition of change. I say this because Galilee was familiar territory to them. Galilee was, however, somewhere full of association with someone who was to all intents and purposes gone from them. But he was *not* gone from them. We need to listen again and carefully to St Mark: *Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.* Mark is not saying that he no longer exists. Jesus challenges to the core what we mean by presence and absence – he has been raised, he is not here, already he is going ahead of you into Galilee. If the risen Lord is in Galilee, then Galilee is where *we* ought to go.

PROSPECT

Individual effort, personal transformation – where do these musings leave us or, more important, where do they bring us? My conclusion is that we need both. The church is a place of distinctive vocations, the church is an activity of mutual enrichment, the church is a society of human difference. Over the last decade we have become so, so twitchy about anything that speaks of individuality – and this is where I disagree with the archbishop, because I think we also need it – only to find that those who are pressing conformity are in fact pushing their own individual agenda. We need to know something good and generous of individualism as well as of personhood to hold our own in a world of other people enforcing their individualisms on us. What we are being sold is an argument like this: everything will be fine if we sign up to someone else's definition of our identity. We see it in church and we see it in politics. The equality agenda deprives me of my identity – it is now as ridiculous as this! In all honesty, it does no such thing. It may well give respect and position to people of whom I disapprove – but, in a democratic society, this is a totally different matter. The archbishop makes a telling phrase: '(the church) must know how to work with the grain of different personal gifts and histories.' We could say exactly the same of the society of which we are part. But the archbishop, gentle of word but devastating of insight, goes further: 'a church that is simply recognizing different preferences is stuck at the level of individualism.'

No matter how much this grates on us with our highly advanced Protestant sense of the individual – his entitlement, her freedom not to commit to anything that offends positions of conviction – I am convinced that the archbishop has a real point when it comes to the church. Individual preference all too often militates against personal belonging. The person of Christ is definitive and normative of our personhood. Its glory is that it creates and sustains community. Baptism binds us all together and asks of us that we be patient like the aged Simeon, patient for the discovery of both an infusion and an effusion of grace which, mercifully, is completely out of our control. Vulnerability is a word which does not often do good things for us – so let me use a picture instead. Preaching at the opening service of the Lambeth Conference 1988, the then archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Runcie, asked those gathered to look up and to examine the arch in the cathedral – he went on to describe its function, strength and purpose as the sum of its two weaknesses. This is language which we in Northern Ireland do not want to hear about – and, if I may be so bold, men in particular do not want to hear about it.

In Lent, we need to question our own strange preference for the heavy burden of self-justification. In Lent we need to grapple with the possibilities of grace deep within the wilderness itself. In Lent we need to see transformation as something which follows on from

conversion in the life of people one by one and in the community of faith which is the church. In Lent we need to embrace the church itself as beyond our own making and maintaining of it. In Lent we need to let Jesus Christ be in us, converting us and transforming us.

1 John 3.2: Dear friends, we are now God's children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.