Sermon

Sunday February 25th at Christ Church Cathedral Dublin – Lenten Reflection

Canon Professor Jim Lucey

‘In the name of the father, and of the son and of the holy spirit, amen.

Scripture says, ‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come to him and will sup with him and he with me’ (Rev. 3:20).

And so the 20th century Christian Martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught us that ‘Christ comes to us in every hungry child who is asking for our help’.

So, we recognise him in every person who walks the streets, in every refugee or migrant, in every man, woman or child who is homeless or is sick.

Christ who made his home with us has no safe place to dwell, except the shop doorway, the temporary shelter, the food bank. He is fleeing from wars in every corner of this earth. He is vulnerable and un-washed, a stranger experiencing madness and addiction. He is one who resists our social norms, one who can be difficult to love.

And yet this hungry desperate neighbour is the one through whom God calls us to himself, through whom our father in heaven speaks to us. It is Jesus, his son who is at the door. He is not only knocking on that door, but also sleeping in that doorway, lying in a bag upon a damp piece of cardboard, and in the throes of addiction.

I do not mean to offend you with this image, of Christ as the homeless substance abuser. I acknowledge that it is shocking. The thought of Christ as an addicted person, a person with a mental health disorder, a psychotic person, someone with mania or depression or extreme panic is distressing, but it is also the truth.

Christ was fully divine and also fully human. He was born on this earth, and so he became our neighbour. He gave us the opportunity to relate to him, so that we might learn the deepest truths about our relationships with God and with each other. This special capacity for relationship is rooted in the most mysterious parts of his creation. I am talking about the human brain.

Deep in the anterior parts of every human brain, where the frontal and temporal and parietal lobes meet, there is a region known as the ‘Operculum’ or lid. If you lift that lid you may look down into a mysterious area called ‘The Insula’.

This insula has many extraordinary functions. It confers on us the capacity for awareness of ourselves and of each other. It is responsible for the apex of consciousness. Without it we cannot appreciate our own state of being or begin to care for the state of others.

The human brain through its billions of connections, including those linked with the insula, makes us conscious of our pain and our joy, our hunger, and our fatigue. And these reciprocal connections grant us the ability to become equally aware of others, to have the capacity to recognise and feel the needs of those around us and to feel compassion for their experience.

The insula, like any other area of the brain, may be damaged as a result of trauma or dementia or a stroke. When this happens, we may lose a characteristic human function, our compassionate 6th sense, the awareness of others and their needs.

But we do not need to have a stroke to lose that sense. We all possess the ability to shut off the other, to cut ourselves away from the awareness of others. Whenever we do this, we lose our integrity. We become broken and so we may become brutal.

Compassion is authentically Christian and integral to our humanity. True compassion is never condescending. We do not ‘cloth the naked and feed the hungry’ just because we choose. We do not give to our neighbour, in order to feel good about ourselves.

We try to be compassionate as Christians because it is the purpose of our life to love, and because we have this faith, that through loving our neighbour, we may live for eternity with the one who lived amongst us.

Human beings are individual and collective. We are social. We are made to love; and not just to like. Human love is for all of God’s creation, in all its forms, despite all its frailty and conscious of all its trauma. When we engage with each other in this way, compassionately, we hope to live in a way that is human, and complete, and Christ-like.

Bonhoeffer put it well when he said, ‘we are all members of a body, not only when we choose to be, but in our whole existence’. We are called to love each other in our homes and in our communities, in our nations and in our world. God made us to love. Christ is calling us to love and to recognise him as he meets us in the doorway. He is saying, ‘Love each other, just as I have loved you’.

This is God’s love and it is revealed in Jesus Christs’ suffering and his death. To paraphrase the theologian Ron Rolheiser, ‘His love is so conscious of the other, that it can forgive its enemies, even it executioners, and it can penetrate our private hells and into it breath peace. The cross of Jesus is not helpless before a broken door’.

And so in this great church of the holy trinity, united, we ask for the courage to love our neighbour as Christ loved us by saying,

Come, Oh Holy Spirit, and

Fill the hearts of thy faithful and

Kindle in them the fire of thy love,

Send forth thy spirits, and they shall be created, and

You shall renew the face of the earth. ENDS.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas

Ron Rolheiser, The Christ who knocks.