

HOLINESS AND FREEDOM, BELONGING AND DETACHMENT

The Presbytery of Edinburgh

3rd February 2009

We live in difficult times, when new beginnings and fresh initiatives are likely to be tolerated and even encouraged, for this is no time for doing nothing.

The massive wave of goodwill towards President Barack Obama is surely due in part to the shared sense that something needs to be done - many things need to be done, and much of the world desires deeply and somewhat fearfully that he will be an initiator, or a facilitator, or an instrument of some of these good things which need to be done. We may not know what the best things to do are, but we are fairly sure that inactivity is not one of them.

In many places in today's world, things are bad, and people are suffering. The voice which came to Moses out of the burning bush, said 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows.' Who are hearing a similar voice today? In Gaza and Congo, in Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka, in Darfur and Mumbai and in places not much reported, the cry of suffering people rises up, the evidence of oppression and massive need is there to be seen.

There are problems and difficulties at home. This is a time of worry for the church, worry bordering on despair. But we cannot list our troubles as if they ranked with the major cruelties and distresses of the world. We must face our local difficulties, but we must see them within the context of the world's need, and of the world's glories too.

From Moses' burning bush the voice which spoke of suffering ends with a call to liberation, but begins with a call to reverence. If we are to learn what our opportunities and duties are in church and community in these troubled times, do we need to delve more deeply into both holiness and freedom?

'Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.'

Reverence for life, for nature, for the good earth, for the created world, is something we can share with many in our culture who steer clear of

churches. I wonder, however, if something more could be shared with many who stand apart from what we try to do. The something more is a more uncompromising witness to holiness, a demanding signal of the mystery of things, a testing practice of deep piety. Its forms will be many, its details wide, its sources from far away as well as near at hand; but is there not a case for saying that our practice of religious reverence is often far too tame, over-domesticated, too sensible by half?

If there is a need for a holiness which goes beyond the forms and customs that we know, is there not too a chance of giving freedom a wider scope and greater completeness? The sharing with the wider community of efforts to bring freedom to the world must include both freedom from external enemies of famine and disease, war and violence, and freedom from those inner haunting troubles which bring distress to many human souls. Forgiveness must be offered as well as food, and absolution must be given beyond the local customs and denominational traditions. The need is too great. The opportunities too huge. This is no time for having as our top priority the wish to be good Presbyterians, or for making the insights of 1560 normative for our time.

Holiness and freedom speak from the burning bush. They should be held together, with conviction about both. The same might be said about another couplet, which could be seen as sympathetic to holiness and freedom.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we find brought together the two ideas of belonging and detachment. The list of the ancestors in the faith is given its interpretation through the perspective of faith when they are described as confessing that they were 'strangers and pilgrims on the earth.'

Belonging is an interesting quality. To belong deeply does not mean that you cannot be anywhere else. Indeed it almost means the opposite - that the more you are at home in the home of your upbringing the more you are able to be at home anywhere. Two ways of being imprisoned by home are, first, not being able to leave, and, second, not being able to return if you do leave. Deep belonging is a gift of inner security which allows one to be a stranger and pilgrim, and not mind it. John Donne said, in one of his sermons, 'These are the two great works which we are to do in this world: first to know that this world is not our home, and then to provide us another home whilst we are in this world.'

How are we to deal with holiness and freedom? How are we to deal with belonging and detachment? The death a few months ago of the eminent architect Sir Bernard Feilden brought back to me a piece of wisdom I heard from him thirty years ago. Speaking ostensibly about his own architectural practice in Norwich, he said that anyone leading a large organisation should give attention to the top level and the bottom level,

but was usually tempted to devote too much time to the middle level. By the top level he meant the future of the firm and its overall quality. By the bottom level he meant taking time to find out if the cleaners in the office were happy. By the middle level he meant frequent committees, working groups, and many administrative matters which could well be devolved and delegated to others. That seems to me to be worth pondering. Is there a danger that instead of taking holiness and freedom seriously, we subsume them into the atmosphere and priorities of church life, when we ought to be letting church life serve holiness and freedom? Is the same true of belonging and detachment?

A statement I read some time ago, by the writer Monica Furlong, seems to say something about all four - holiness, freedom, belonging, detachment. She is describing the sort of clergy she wants. 'I want them to be people who are secure enough in the value of what they are doing to have time to read, to sit and think, and who face the emptiness and possible depression which often attack people when they do not keep the surface of their mind occupied. I want them to be people who have faced this kind of loneliness and discovered how fruitful it is, as I want them to be people who have faced the problems of prayer. I want them to be people who can sit still without feeling guilty, and from whom I can learn some kind of tranquillity in a society which has almost lost the art.'

The Church is in difficult and demanding times. There is open hostility to religious involvement. We have hard questions to ask. How much should we be doing as the Church of Scotland, and how greatly should we be trying to work with other churches? How can we best use ordained ministers? Where lies the future of congregations?

Our new Presbytery Clerk starts with the good wishes of us all. This is the city of the Scottish Reformation. Where better to show how the church can begin to reform itself again?

We should not take ourselves too seriously. It is not an effective stance to adopt. But the better reason for not concentrating on ourselves is the call to progress issued as the conclusion of the list of patriarchs and worthies in Hebrews - 'Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.'