

Working with God

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; I Corinthians 3:1-9

As I enter the final count-down to the time I'm about to spend in preparation for Moderatorial duties, I have been not only overwhelmed by good wishes and reckless generosity, but also with a huge amount of advice. I have met every living ex-Moderator. Usually about ten minutes into any conversation they'll say, "Now, if there's one thing you need to do as Moderator..." Needless to say that one thing is not the same one thing.

It's also been true with some of you, and friends from inside and outside the Church. "If there's one thing you need to do..." Most of it hinges around making a difference, being noticed and being heard. Some want a concentration on good news stories and how well the Church is still doing; others want reality about how awful everything is. Some want radical change; others want steadfast maintenance of tradition. Speak your mind on everything; say nothing that hasn't been approved by the General Assembly.

The Moderatorial role is one of primarily chairing the General Assembly, and thereafter there is an ambassadorial role. It is not an executive role but there are opportunities to speak out on a wide variety of pressing national and international issues. Moderators have spoken out on the scandal of homelessness, the moral wickedness of the US visa travel ban and inter-faith dialogue. They've been lauded and lampooned.

If there is one thing that holds everything together it is the fact that so many diverse people have different views and ideas of what the Church should be and do, but that the Church should **be** something and **do** something is agreed.

Religious communities and families have always had a tendency to separate and split. It is as true of Judaism and Islam as it is of Christianity. Later this year I will attend the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in Wittenberg, Germany, on 31st October – the date Martin Luther allegedly nailed on a church door his 95 Theses outlining what the Christian Church should be. The Reformation marks the greatest split in the Christian family. But Church

splits over what the Church should be were, and remain, nothing new. The Church in Corinth makes Presbyterianism look like one unified body. In Corinth you would find the equivalent of the Church of Corinth; the Free Church of Corinth; the United Church of Corinth, the Wee Free Church of Corinth, and the Continuing Free Church of Corinth, and no doubt many more. Or here a few years ago: I belong to the original Morningside Parish; I'm St Matthew's; I'm Braid; I'm South Morningside; I'm Cluny; even a very few saying, I'm Morningside High."

In Paul's time – around 40 to 50AD – Christianity was spreading rapidly across the known world, and had reached Greece long before Paul did. Some liked his teaching; others did not. Some preferred the more urbane, cosmopolitan Apollos; others did not. Some preferred the down-to-earth teaching of the leader of the apostles, Peter, others did not. The Church of Corinth was fractured and fractious. In many ways churches reflect the societies in which they are embedded. "So we separate into our camps on the left and on the right, certain of our own moral superiority."ⁱ

But the overarching truth of the Church remains the same. We are called to work together, and we are called to work together with God.

Working together with God requires nurturing. It is not enough simply wanting to do good and be nice. That is an option open to all humanity. But being a follower and co-worker with God requires a more. It requires nurturing and development. Paul, often portrayed as a closet misogynist, uses a wonderfully maternal image of how Christians need to be nurtured in faith. Before we are ready for solid food, we need to be weaned on milk. Then we grow.

A second century Christian writer, Irenaeus of Lyons considered that Christians should, "take refuge in the Church, to drink milk at her breast, to be fed with the Scriptures of the Lord." He went on to say that the Church had been, "planted in the world as a paradise."ⁱⁱ

It's six weeks since we marked the Epiphany and the Wise men have long since packed up their boxes and disappeared back into the East, and the shepherds and the lowing cattle of Christmas are a long way back now. The reflective, or for some miserable season of Lent

looms, and its wilderness moments. But how many of us feel as if we live and work in this Church community, which has “been planted in the world as a paradise”?

But we have.

We are all part of the same garden, regardless of who planted, or who watered. We are all part of the same garden regardless of where we have come from or where we think we are heading. In Corinthian terms, we might belong to Peter, or Paul, or Apollos. But the point is, if we are followers of Jesus, we belong to Christ. We are co-workers with each other and with Christ. In our lives, it is God Who gives the growth.

We are all supposed to be working together. We are all called to work with God.

That may not be plain-sailing. That may well require some hard-bargaining; it may even call for agreeing to disagree. But if we are followers of Jesus of Nazareth, we are all called to work with God. Together.

There will be those who plant. But what use is planting if there is no watering? There will be those who water, but what use is watering if no seed has been put in the ground? And what use either planting or watering if the good earth is not there, and the growth does not come?

The more we look at what the Church should be, and what Christian faith is, the more we see that it calls for individuality working together in community. The more we understand we see a call not for uniformity of appearance but for unity of purpose. We may have day-to-day quarrels about what priorities should be and how we might best achieve them, but our high calling is to work together, with God, to spread His love and mercy and joy and peace. We cannot do this alone, we must do this together.

And that thinking applies not just to life within the Church – but to your family life, your friendship life, your work life, your community life. We are called to work with God, together, in everything.

“The late Henri Nouwen often spoke about his journey to L’Arche, a community of mentally handicapped people and their assistants, trying faithfully and simply to live the gospel together.

Nouwen, assigned to work with Adam, a twenty-four-year-old epileptic man who could not speak or dress himself, spoke of his real fears. A university professor who was far more

comfortable with matters of the head than of the heart, he was now assigned the task of bathing and dressing a grown man. Over time, fear gave way to something new:

Somehow I started to realise that this poor, broken man was the place where God was speaking to me in a whole new way. Gradually I discovered real affection in myself and I thought that Adam and I belonged together and that it was so important...I want you to understand a little better what happened between Adam and me. Maybe I can say it very simply. Adam taught me a lot about God's love in a very concrete way.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this paradise Church, in this paradise community, in this paradise world – **if we would only but see it that way** – we do not have to look very far to see manifestations of Christ in the midst of **everything**. We are called to work together with God, so look beyond the petty squabbles to where Christ's love abounds. See the spouse tenderly caring for her husband who has dementia; see the partner caring for his loved one who has Motor Neurone's disease; see the child sharing his computer game with a child from a different culture; see the refugee offering help to the native-born; see the mother raising two children on her own; see the single person stepping nervously out of their home into a group where he is not known.

We are called to work together with God, to see the paradise in which we live. Where Paul has planted. Where Apollos has watered. And where God continues to give the growth. Our families. Our friendships. Our communities. Our workplace. Our Church. Our world. When we work with God, God will give the growth.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Richard M Simpson, 'Feasting on the Word', Year A, Volume 1 p351

ⁱⁱ Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies' V p20

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri Nouwen, "Journey to L'Arche"