

Bible Study III

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES - FORUM 9-13 JULY 2004

“IN THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS”

John 14: 25 - 31

²⁵ “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸ You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you. If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. ³⁰ I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; ³¹ but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.”

John ends this section of his discourse with Jesus’ invitation “Rise. Let us go hence.” This anticipates their departure to cross the Kidron valley with him which follows the completion of the discourse. In that way it reminds us of the shadow of the cross falling across the rising and the going hence.

Likewise, it is preceded by Jesus’ announcement that “the ruler of this world is coming”. Jesus made it clear that this ruler has no power over him, yet something which would make it appear as if he did was about to happen because Jesus added by way of explanation “but I do as the Father has commanded me so that the world may know that I love the Father.” From our vantage point we understand how dazzlingly true this was as Jesus submitted to the cross, and to the ruler’s apparent victory, because he loved the Father.

In the next breath he went on to speak of himself as the vine and the Father as the vine grower and to offer the image of branches of the vine to explain the deep unity his followers would have in him. They would be pruned to make them fruitful but they would only fall victim to the ruler of this world if they failed to abide in him.

According to St John, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would be sent in his name by the Father, to replace his physical presence with them. Earlier Jesus had said of the Holy Spirit: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you and he will be in you.” (14:16-17). Just as Jesus was “with” his disciples then, so the Spirit would be “with” them when he departed.

The Spirit would teach his followers everything. He would remind them of all that Jesus had said to them. In other words, followers of Jesus down to today are not just lovers of him, are not just his friends, they are not just drawn into the deepest and most intimate relationship with his Father by him, they are men and women in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. The Holy Spirit constantly guides them to remember what Jesus has taught them and to understand it on deeper and deeper levels of their being and with deeper and deeper degrees of their faith. Because of this role, the Holy Spirit has been called at different times “the living memory of the Church.”

It is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible for Jesus' followers to believe in him after he had returned to the Father. It is the Holy Spirit who enables them generation after generation to become his "friends". It is the Holy Spirit who enables successive followers to live in Jesus as he lives in them and so participate in Jesus' own life with the Father.

It is the Holy Spirit who reminds us of all that Christ has said who is the source of the ecumenical movement. I would like to quote a friend of mine who died recently and who, I believe, was one of the greatest ecumenists with whom the Holy Spirit has blessed the Catholic Church and perhaps the churches. The passage is taken from an interview with Jean Tillard op not too long before he died. He was asked about the "sin against the Spirit" and began by saying how difficult it is to claim something is such a sin:

"It is difficult to speak of a "sin against the Spirit" because no one truly knows what is in question. Without a doubt in Mark (3:29) it is a refusal to be guided by the Spirit and to attribute to God what comes from God, seeing there rather the mark of the Evil One. We can say that if the Church refused to evolve, to read "the signs of the times", it would refuse the Spirit. But it is always imprudent to label such and such a fact, such and such a behaviour as a sin against the Spirit."

Then he went on to say:

"I said that I would, with caution, label as "sin against the Spirit" the refusal to hear the ecumenical call because the future of the Gospel is at stake. These men and women who present themselves before the world as disciples of Christ the Reconciler, members of his Body of reconciliation and communion, carriers of his Spirit, the Spirit of reconciliation and communion, are internally split and incapable of being reconciled one with another. If it were only a question of trite quarrels, it would not be tragic. But the tragedy is that they are divided even in their understanding of the essential elements of revelation and the celebration of the sacraments. In this situation, the Churches destroy the credibility of the Gospel of God. Even more, they proclaim in fact that the power of division – one of the main faces of the power of evil – prevails over that of the Cross. Even these men and women, who explicitly affirm having received at baptism the Spirit of Christ "putting to death hostility", are in conflict on essentials. Without exception, things being what they are, the Churches contradict by their division what they confess in their baptism. Thus they render the Gospel unacceptable to many men and women who desperately seek salvation. Their division is an offence against God and his design; this is why it becomes an offence against their brothers and sisters who seek God. So I say that to refuse the ecumenical call today is a matter of the deepest gravity."

Jean Tillard op committed his whole life to the ecumenical movement, not because it gave him a career path or interesting, international meetings to attend, but because he had no choice as a baptized follower of Jesus. How telling are his words as we gather under the shadow of the cross. Our division, he argued, proclaims that the power of division, one of the main faces of the power of evil, has prevailed over the power of the cross. "The ruler of this world" had only apparent power over Jesus upon the cross and can only have real power over his followers if, like branches of a vine, they cease to abide in him. Christian disunity is our situation of sin. It is not compatible

with being “friends” of Jesus together. To collude with it is to collude with the prince of this world.

The Holy Spirit who reminds us of everything which Jesus said and did binds us together in the one truth of Christ. That we are bound apart rather by the many truths of Christ indicates that the Holy Spirit who is “the living memory of the Church” is not being heard. Our response is too weak and so our memories are too faulty.

At the same time, the ecumenical movement of which we are a part is an indication that the Holy Spirit is restoring our memories and renewing our friendships. To resist his movements today is rather provocatively suggested by Tillard, to risk sinning against the Holy Spirit.

With the coming of the Holy Spirit, Jesus promised also to share with his followers or “friends” the gift of his peace. This is not just the gift of a peace but specifically the gift of his peace. “My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give it to you.” The peace which Jesus gives and the Holy Spirit establishes is at the one time peace in our hearts, peace between us, and peace for the world.

Sometimes we emphasise the first of these because it is such a beautiful gift, and one closely related to freedom. Just as the world cannot give Christ’s peace, so it cannot give his freedom. We can only be at peace within ourselves if we are free from the power of “the ruler of the world”, if our freedom has been set free. But peace from Jesus is much more than this. It is the peace which comes from his presence, just as it is the freedom which comes from being captured by him so as to be made into his friends by him.

The gift of peace is really the gift of the inner peace of God because it arises in us only as we arise in God, with Christ in us and we in him and the Father in him so that we are in the Father. It is the gift which the Holy Spirit gives as he makes Christ present to us. In some ways, it is the gift of the Holy Spirit himself. This is why the personal gift of peace is so related to the communal gift of peace. This gift like so many others may be a truly personal gift but it is never an individual gift. God does not deal with individuals, only persons, who by their very nature are always in relationships.

To seek for personal peace without the peace with one’s brothers and sisters is to seek comfort rather than freedom. True freedom opens one up to “the other” or to the others because one is no longer confined by one’s own needs or ambitions. The Spirit who unites one to Christ is the same Spirit who unites the others to Christ. The unity established is always community, or more accurately, communion. It is always the whole Christ, head and members to whom one is united.

Divisions between Christians in any community or between the Christian Churches contradict this peace which is the very presence of the Holy Spirit in us. Christian disunity is not Christian at all because it is not of Christ and is destructive of all that the Spirit is bringing about.

Followers or “friends” of Jesus are men and women of the truth and he is the truth. The Spirit will never lead them in a different direction, but always to Him. The Spirit will never lead them to think something contrary to what He has taught. And the Spirit will find ways of revealing to them, to their hearts and minds, what is God’s will, even when they are resistant. The Spirit will never reveal to us different truths, though as always respectful of our cultures, languages and histories, the Spirit will reveal the one truth to us in different forms.

How is it then that the history of the Christian community is a history of people dividing from each other precisely over the truth? Even in the New Testament itself we see descriptions of conflict in the first Christian communities over where the truth was to be found and which of the teachers were to be followed. Often the different forms the one truth has taken through the working of God Spirit have been interpreted as opposed truths, not because of conflicts inherent in the different versions of the one truth, but because of conflicts between languages, cultures and people. Instead of allowing the one truth which is Christ to unite them despite their differences, they succumb to their differences, and tear apart the one truth of Christ. After all the divisions of the past, we are now left with a divided version of the truth, of the Gospel, of the Tradition. We struggle to reconcile these by seeking again to recognize the one truth of Jesus Christ, the Apostolic Tradition, in these diverse and divided forms. Mutual recognition makes possible mutual reconciliation.

However this is not easy. Each of us finds our certainty or our confidence about the truth in different ways. From the scriptures themselves; from the living tradition of the Church; from the authoritative teaching of the governing bodies of the Church; from the discernment of the truth among all the faithful; from theologians and from scholars; from saints and mystics; through the signs of the times; in the silence of their own hearts. We all put together those various sources of authority or certainty in different ways. We weight them differently. But in one way or another, most are present in most of our Christian communities.

We are called to love each other as friends, but this does not mean that we love each other as the world would have us love. Tolerance and inclusion are respectable qualities and values of contemporary human society and appropriate values to be embraced by Christians, but they are very inadequate versions of the Christian call to love.

Jesus said “love one another” but he also called us to believe what he has taught us. Christians therefore are tolerant of all members of our human community, but they stand for certain beliefs and will defend them, even if this brings them into opposition with other members of the human community.

Christians would seek to include all struggling members of the human community in their embrace, but they have boundaries laid down by what they believe about Christ which inhibits their including everybody to the same degree. It doesn't mean they do not love them. It does mean they cannot share their Christian fellowship to the same extent with them.

Truth and love are the two hallmarks of the Christian community. We are people who stand for the truth which is Jesus Christ and we are people who love with his own passionate love for all whom and all that God has created. If we were only people of the truth, then we would have no capacity to reach each other or to share what we have with others, because we would be intransigent and dogmatic and utterly exclusive. If we were only people of love, then we would cease to stand for anything and there would be no boundary between us and the world. We have to be people of truthful love and loving truth.

Another way of saying this would be that we have to be truly open and yet truly faithful. If we are only open to the other, then we can easily lose ourselves in the other and indeed lose ourselves in the world. If we are only faithful, then we will not recognize Christ among his other friends and we will not recognize signs of the Spirit struggling to shape the world outside our Christian community. But if we are utterly faithful while at the same time being utterly open, then the Spirit can work in us and indeed our openness and our faithfulness are already his work in us.

But to be utterly faithful while being utterly open is a very demanding task. It is a profoundly Christian challenge. Too easily Christians bind themselves up in the truth as they have perceived it within their own communities, their own families or their own selves. This gives them a particular position vis-à-vis God and the rest of the world, and they hold on to it with great tenacity and every ferocity. The risk of relating to others in love is too great because it might jeopardize this truth to which they hold with such ferocity.

Alternatively, Christians are so loving that the truth of Christ is watered down and eventually their Christian identity disappears to some extent. It is very hard to be equally faithful with the same tenacity and equally loving with the same generosity of spirit as those are who exemplify but one side of this dual calling of the Christian.

It is hard in a relationship where love is strongly present to name the truth which will cause difficulties for the people one loves. It is hard when truth leads to opposition and conflict to speak the words of love and to ask that the warring parties or the divided Christians keep working together, keep trusting, keep hoping, keep loving. Therefore, forgiveness, the seeking of it and the giving of it, are always part of the relationship.

Dialogue is the patient, painstaking determination to hear the other with complete openness and to reveal one's own deepest self to the other, not just one's best rhetoric. True dialogue is the lifelong task of the Christian in relationship with others in his or her own community and with other Christian Churches.

Unless one is open to the other in dialogue, there is no possibility of any development through the encounter. In fact, in Christian dialogue, one is ultimately open to what the Holy Spirit will lead both parties to discover, about the other and, indeed, about themselves, and above all about the Word of God. One develops a much more profound understanding of one's tradition when one is questioned or challenged by a dialogue partner, because one is thereby forced to review one's fidelity to the Word of God or the Apostolic Tradition. The results of ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and so many other World Communions are indicators of the extraordinary fruitfulness of genuine dialogue when both of these virtues are exercised. The signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on October 31, 1999, five years ago, is a recent marvellous example of such fruitfulness.

When speaking of dialogue in the ecumenical or any other context, one is not describing a meeting of persons in which no-one holds to anything with conviction, or, on the other hand, in which no-one is free to say they believe something is true and consequently something else seems to be false. In fact, genuine dialogue requires the capacity to do precisely that. At the same time, dialogue is not possible if one is not open at every level of one's being, and not just intellectually, to what one may learn from the other, about the other, about oneself, and above all, about the truth which comes from God. In *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II described dialogue not simply as an exchange of ideas, but in some way as always an 'exchange of gifts'. (UUS28).

This Forum is, among many other things, a multi-lateral dialogue. If we are open and faithful at the same time, then the Spirit of truth will lead us into all truth and remind us of what Jesus Christ has said and done. Then and only then will our deliberations lead us to God and to doing God's will.

Bishop Michael Putney