

CELEBRATE TOGETHER
UNITED SERVICE FOR CHURCHES TOGETHER
Sunday 1st June 2003
St John's Cathedral Portsmouth

'We had to celebrate and be glad, for this you brother was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' (Lk.15.32)

This is the climax of a story about an estranged family, in which the sons have gone their separate ways. This is the story of a father who painfully struggles to bring them together again. This is an unfinished story because separation is not entirely overcome. This is a story of celebration, affirmation and grace. This is a story about how the lost can be found and how the dead can come alive again. Today something of our Lord's parable is being realized in our celebration together in this cathedral.

SEPARATION

The two sons, in our Lord's parable, are very different. The elder son is loyal, dutiful and faithful to his father. He is hardworking and seeks to preserve the tradition of the farm. The younger son doesn't care about the farm. He is impatient with those around him. He feels stifled and fenced in by the institution. He wants to break out, escape and establish his own identity. In separation both are losers. The younger gains freedom but loses his sense of belonging. The elder brother demonstrates faithfulness, yet duty stifles creativity. While the younger tries to forget his brother, the elder nurses a grudge against him. Both sons have become lost in their own 'far countries'.

This parable could well describe features of the divided Church; the separation, the leaving home, the loss, the estrangement. Within the Church's story there has always been a tension between those who are faithful to the tradition, working hard within it, and those who are impatient and feel hemmed in. I suppose that tension exists in all of us.

But there is another tension, even separation; the tension between the gathered people of God and the dispersed people of God; the visible Church described by our Lord as 'a city on a hill' and the hidden Church as 'salt of the earth' (Mtt.5.13-15). Often when speaking of Church we think of congregations in ecclesiastical buildings which become our spiritual homes. Yet we spend much of our lives in places other than home; in a 'far country' with its challenges and demands. We live, work and play in a world where we can gain all or lose all. All of us are called to witness in the world and this witness is often spearheaded by the work of the chaplains in our hospitals, educational institutions, business and in the armed services. They often feel separated and alone in a 'far country'.

But there is a further separation; the greatest of all. We are reminded of this today as members of the G8 summit meet in Evian; it is the separation between those who at home and 'have food enough to spare' and those who starve in the 'far country'.

AFFIRMATION.

'While he was still a long way off his father saw him and was filled with compassion and ran to his son and embraced him' (Lk.15.20).

On 24th April 1744 John Wesley preached before the University at St. Mary's,

Oxford. It was an impressive occasion with a vast congregation. His subject was *Scriptural Christianity* and his text, 'And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit'. He described how the flame of God's grace comes upon individuals, affirming them and flowing through them. Wesley held that God always takes the initiative and reaches out to all people. So the gracious flame of love flows into our neighbourhoods, communities, crossing countries and nations until the whole world is filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Wesley ended his sermon by challenging his congregation to make it happen. Such was the consternation at the close that the Vice-Chancellor demanded to see his script. John Wesley was not invited back! Methodists sing:

O that the world might taste and see
The riches of his grace!
The arms of love that compass me
Would all mankind embrace.

I imagine the father, in our Lord's parable, looking out each day from the highest room in his house attempting to catch a glimpse of his returning son. It is the memory of home which triggers his son's return. The father runs to meet him. Even before his son can fully articulate words of contrition he is embraced. Repentance is swallowed up in gracious affirmation. Love does not seek to possess or control. Love releases and love embraces. The younger son will always be a son in his father's eyes, whatever he does. Therefore he must wear the robe, the sandals and the ring; tokens of sonship. He will never be reduced to a hired hand.

The same grace is present in the father's relationship with his other son. The father again takes the initiative and goes outside to his older son. He, even though at home, has become lost in his own 'far country'. The father affirms him, 'All that I have is yours'. There is no trace of sentimentality in the father's relationship with either son. Justice is maintained for there is no attempt to reinstate the younger son to all his former privileges since he gets no second inheritance. In this parable relationships come before rules, and affirmation comes before condemnation. Everything takes place in the context of grace. Today we celebrate that same grace which draws us together as Christians.

CELEBRATION

Many of the Gospel stories contain references to eating, drinking and parties! Indeed the first sign recorded in John's Gospel is our Lord's miracle of making water into wine (Jn.2.1-11). Jesus always seems to be going to parties. He parties with publicans and sinners (Lk.5.27-33), with Zachaeus (Lk.19.1-10), with Simon the Pharisee (Lk.7.36-39) and of course there is the feeding of the 5000 (Lk.9.10-17). Often when Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God he likens it to a feast or banquet (Mtt.22.1-2). There is of course the last supper, the Eucharist (Lk.22.14-19) and then the resurrection meals (Lk.24.30-32). The risen Christ always seems to appear at meal times (Lk.24.40-43). All this suggests that God is particularly present when we eat and drink together. The climax of the story of the lost son centres around a meal. It is no ordinary meal. It is a banquet! The fatted calf has been killed. They have hired a band which strums away in the background. It is a real party with music and dancing! What is God like? He is like the gracious father of this parable. If, however, I am to be theologically correct I have to describe God as Trinity. The Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century coined the term *perichoresis* (*circumincession*) to describe the relatedness of persons within the Trinity. The word literally means 'to proceed about

each other'. It is a sort of dance of reciprocal identification suggesting movement and flux within God; a finding and loosing; a sort of successive interaction of two persons 'in the sustaining presence of the Other'. And at the centre of the dance there is stillness. Both brothers will one day join with the father in the music and dancing. So too will all estranged people both far and near. Whatever the future shape of the Church I believe it will be Trinitarian demonstrating movement, openness, unity and diversity. And we will all dance together. Listen! In the quietness if you are still enough you can hear the sound of distant music heralding the approach of Pentecost.

Thomas Merton, at the end of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, writes, 'The Lord plays and diverts Himself in the garden of his creation, and if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to...follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far...to catch the echoes of that dancing...No despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.'

Listen! In the quietness if you are still enough you can hear the sound of distant music heralding the approach of Pentecost.

When the younger son returns, the father flings his arms around him and cries, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.'

God showers us with signs and symbols of his gracious embrace. He invites us to bring our symbols of celebration and to express words of renewed dedication.

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were far off you met us in your Son and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. Thanks be to God. Amen