

## Finding God in other Christians - extract from Ch.3

Jesus was not known for politeness. He was certainly outspoken when it came to confronting hypocrisy and standing by the marginalised. In fact there were times when he embarrassed his friends and supporters and upset his relatives by his apparent lack of concern for their feelings. The 12-year-old in the Temple telling his distraught parents, who had been searching for him for three days, that they should have known to look for him in his Father's house was hardly the meek and mild Jesus of Victorian hymnody. Neither was the man who made a whip out of cords and drove the loan sharks out of the Temple. There was an impatience and energy about him which the religious and secular authorities found disquieting. If the Church is to rediscover this energy in the face of the world's hardness of heart, its exploitation of the weak and marginalised, it first needs to rediscover the energy of God's love, his Holy Spirit, within its own life.

Jesus said that his disciples would be recognised not just by their words and actions, but by being a certain kind of people. In both public and private life they would reveal God's love in the sincerity of their love for one another, as well as in the things they said and did. They would be known by their fruits. The problem for those who are considering becoming Christians lies in not always being able to tell which are the good fruits and which, though they may appear good from the outside, are not so good on the inside, like a luscious looking pear which turns out to be dry and tasteless when you bit into it. So it is with the Church, when a person goes to a new church and finds that it is just as dry and tasteless as the one they left behind. So perhaps it is time Christians of all churchmanships came together in order to find out how good we really are on the inside, whether as Christian community we are in danger of losing our flavour because we no longer convey the vital love for one another which the world so badly needs to taste. Many people who are thinking of returning to church, and many of those already in it, sense that despite what we do in the way of outreach and mission, we are not moving forward ourselves. They sense a certain tiredness which at times makes us sound insincere. Something inside us is missing; we lack the energy and passionate love for people which made Jesus such an attractive person and drew others to him.

Christians are called to treat one another in the way Jesus treated people, beginning with the Christians they find embarrassing, or who do not conform to their expectations of what a Christian should be like. Only in this way will they convince others of what Jesus means to them. They need to have a particular passion for marginalised Christians, whose humanity is often implicitly devalued.

Perhaps it is time Christians started to love the weakest among them with the vitality of the love shown by a French soldier who, passing through a village in central France shortly after the Second World War, came across a group of villagers tarring and feathering a woman. The woman had been having an affair with a German officer, probably in order to

protect and feed her own children. The ex-soldier was enraged at the way the villagers were dehumanising this woman, so he intervened to stop her persecutors and restore her honour. In taking on her attackers, he reclothed her in her humanity. Christians are similarly called to be careful to protect, and where necessary restore, the honour of other Christians, their value in the eyes of God.

### *Honouring each other's faith*

Christians don't always honour other Christians by taking care to reclothe them in their full humanity when they are mocked or criticised. This also applies in the context of disputes and arguments. The losers are just 'losers', people who are not part of the important bigger picture which others have of the Church.

If we look closely at Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son, we see that it tells us something about how a person honours another and reclothes him by giving him back his sense of belonging, and hence his self-worth. The painting says something too about how honour is also connected to valuing the way others live out their faith and it tells us something about faith itself. The older son in his respectable but everyday clothes resents the fact that his father seems not to recognise his loyalty and devotion, and takes his dogged faithfulness for granted. As far as he is concerned, his younger brother's faith was not up to staying at home and getting on with the job of running the estate.

What the older brother perhaps does not realise is that the younger brother's faith had been worn down by the disillusionments of life. He finally lost it altogether when his friends used him for his money and dropped him when the money ran out. So he comes home 'naked', without any of the old faith, which failed him when he really needed it, but with a great desire for God. The father in Rembrandt's picture clothes him with the best cape and gives him the family signet ring. He reclothes the young man as an honoured son without even waiting for him to wash, as the painting so graphically portrays. The old rags he is still wearing are the old 'self'-sufficiency, the only faith he ever really had. But even that old self-faith is acknowledged by the father, who reclothes it with the new cape. He accepts and honours the young man as he is, and in what he has been, not as someone he might become in the future. The new clothes he gives to the younger son represent both a transformation of his old faith into something new and precious, and the fulfilment of what he realizes he most needs, which is to be a son again.<sup>1</sup>

Those who are moving into new churchmanships, or who are beginning to forge friendships with Christians who are quite different from themselves, are giving back to the Church something which many Christians have lost sight of, the regeneration of desire for God. Their own desire to experience God, to 'taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps.34:8), is making them look for other contexts in which they might find him, once again, and as if for the first time. It is a kind of homecoming in reverse. They are finding God in new ways, in the 'homes' of other Christians. But the will for change and for a deeper encounter with God

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London: 1992, ch.3

also comes with a desire for enduring friendship with the Christians they left behind. The two belong together. Moving across churchmanship boundaries is not just about preferring one church to another. It is about journeying more deeply into God so that we can honour and be honoured by other Christians for who we are in whatever church context we find ourselves.