

Bringing Healing into Human Evil

Space in the City 14 May 2008

Canon Paul Townsend

If I am not clear

My words on this subject come from my heart. A heart formed by years of reflection and experience of ministry. Which has to be true for everyone? So there will be a variety of views. Mine will be informed and shaped by the teaching of the Catholic Church. If there are times when I am not clear, then I think that is in the nature of the subject. Remember St. Augustine of Hippo who answered the question “Where does evil come from?” He said this **“I sought whence evil comes and there was no solution.”**^[1] His own quest for truth in this area was only resolved by conversion to the living God. So our starting point has to be **fixing the eyes of faith on him alone who is the conqueror.** And so Luke says **“When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace; but where one stronger than he assails him and overcomes him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his spoil. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters.”**^[2] (Luke 11, 21-23)

Christ the Healer

How important not to be against him and to gather with him? So any discussion about bringing healing into human evil has to be centred on Christ the only healer and conqueror of evil.

The Holocaust

For part of my Easter Break I visited Oświęcim, which the world would know as Auschwitz-Birkenau. If ever I had been tempted to think that evil did not exist, this visit meant that I had to think again. The deception; the gradual move from concentration camps to extermination. Concentration camps first appeared in Russia in

1918 for the isolation of “class enemies” in the Russian Soviet Republic. I note Solzhenitsyn’s description of the GULAG – that “sewerage disposal system”. As time went on from 1933 the net widened to include: “psychopaths and other mental cases; beggars, Jehovah’s witnesses, vagabonds, gypsies, vagrants, work-shy individuals, homosexuals, idlers, habitual drunkards, prostitutes and grumblers”^[3]. The death camps for me are a manifestation of evil because they were the places where human beings were systematically eliminated and exterminated. Evil because such destruction cannot be of God and as God is the giver of life he is the one who decides on its termination. Evil because there was no respect for the dignity of the person as gift from God. Evil because the problem of evil was blamed on people who did not live up to certain indiscriminate expectations. To make the world a better place, these people had to be exterminated and everything would be fine. For me this is the depth of evil because a human being is where the Spirit of God can be seen to be present and to eliminate others because they are evil is, I think, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This is my personal interpretation.

The Dead Silence of Unconcern

At Auschwitz there is a map showing the railway network that ran across Europe to the concentration and extermination camp in Poland. The question remains in my mind about how the ideal of elimination could remain so unopposed for the 12 years that it was in the ascendant in Germany between 1933 and 1945? In the words of Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* “**the absence of any uproar of emotions and the dead silence of unconcern**”^[4].

The Seductive Power of Evil

The answer is because there is something seductive about the ideal and idea of eliminating people to get rid of evil. For Christians it is a lie because only Jesus is the conqueror of evil. So evil has many seductive forms for persons and for

communities and only the Spirit of God can help us see the truth. If ever we say that evil does not exist in this decision or that situation, we are probably fooling ourselves.

The Power of Sin

I've been trying to describe evil which for disciples of the Lord Jesus is about the power of sin in our history. Christians would talk of original sin which is not the work of God but of humanity and a result of our refusal to trust in the power and goodness of God and do it our way because we think we know better. That is my understanding of the fall as described in Genesis. **“What revelation makes known to us is confirmed by our own experience. For when we look into our own hearts we find that we are drawn towards what is wrong and sunk in many evils which cannot come from our good creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his source, humanity has also upset the relationship which should link him to his last end; and at the same time he has broken the right order that should reign within himself as well as between himself and other men and all creatures.”**^[5]

St. John describes the “Sin of the World” which infects all of us. Humanity has an inclination to evil which excludes no one. This is a wounding and not a total corruption. Christian Initiation filling us with the life of Christ turns us towards God, open us to trust and confidence while the consequences of fallen nature persist in us. That fallen nature means that we are living in a state of tension in which the power of sin is always leading us, distracting us, tempting us to cooperate with it by personal transgressions or sins. It is so important to appreciate that there is a connection between the state of sin in which we exist and our own cooperation with it which contributes to its power and separates us from what is good and true.

Where Healing Begins

So where does the healing begin, which is the title of this talk? In Christ it begins and ends, he and only he takes away the sin of the world. Those who have received the Spirit share in his ministry of healing, a ministry which defined the work of Jesus and which does the same for us who dare to claim that we are his Body the Church. Our presence in the world is all about making the healing power of Christ something that is seen and heard, something tangible and available to transform humanity and creation. As we do this we proclaim the presence of Christ and his Gospel which is essentially Good News about healing, making whole and the restoration of all things in Christ that have been damaged as a result of humanity's freely chosen sin. Somehow we are to be experts in healing which requires us to be experts in sin as well. Not that we should rejoice in our own transgressions, which are themselves the fruit of sin, but that in prayer and openness to God we should be constantly diligent that we might be aware of sin's subtle, seducing and misleading power. I would like to spend the rest of this reflection by considering the ways in which I think the Christian family, indeed the whole human family, can and must make a difference in our world rejecting sin and choosing good.

Personal Conversion as a Lifelong Process

The process has to begin in ourselves in a willingness to accept that the wounding and damaging power of sin exerts its influence in us. So many have written and preached about the folly of imagining that there is no manifestation or collusion with the power of sin in our personal life. Such thoughts are foolishness and damaging to ourselves and to our mission to proclaim Christ. We must acknowledge our weakness and pray for enlightenment as to how sin manifests itself in us. This prayer is always answered so that we might seek forgiveness which brings the strength to grow and draw closer to the way of life Christ intends for us. In Catholic tradition this is so crucial that it is sacramental. We call it the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation and it is essentially about our belief that Christ could not be more present

in the act of forgiveness and the change for good that it brings. The recognition of the effects of sin in us becomes an opportunity for the healing of ourselves and all those with whom we share our humanity. The experience of forgiveness is about our personal lives but it is also about putting right the relationships and the mission which is our joint responsibility.

The Immensity of God's Love and Our Own Nothingness

The awareness of our own weakness and possibly the discouragement which follows has to give way to something bigger and better. In fact it opens us to the immensity of God's love and to the truth that his power for good is infinite and overcomes all negativity and damage. The next stage is to allow our shame, in the sense that it is used in the first chapters of Genesis, to fill us with that divine gift of humility, which in the words of Mary, sees God as regarding us in our nothingness. This humility growing out of an awareness of the love of God gives way to that vital gift which is trust. Confidence in the power of God to heal, marked by a total abandonment, is the route to the most effective and complete healing because it opens human experience to the Holy Spirit. I want to emphasise the gift of confidence if we are to be effective disciples. In my own tradition, like forgiveness, serious sickness and the giving it over in faith to God for healing is a sacred moment. We speak of the Sacrament of Healing, when we believe, the Spirit of God, could not be more present answering the confidence of the sick person in the experience of healing. The laying on of hands, the open hands in trust of the sick person and the anointing with blessed oil become a moment when the healing power of Christ is seen and heard. In this work of bringing healing to human evil, prayer is an indispensable element. Whether it is the community prayer of the liturgy; the silence of contemplation in solitude; the reflective listening to the Word of God or the grateful probing and assimilation of the tradition of the Church, prayer in its many forms is the experience that will draw us deeper into the love of Christ and help us see more clearly through the eyes of Christ. That being guided by the light of Christ is pivotal and crucial in

our mission as Christians, which is a mission of healing to the world.

Admitting our Blindness

Jesus says in John 9 to the Jews that if they were blind they would not be guilty; but now that they say “We see” their guilt remains”. I have always found this a difficult verse to interpret until I read a book by a Carthusian called “The Prayer of the Presence of God”. I have now come to see that sin is constantly blinding us to truth. It works in the “**negative influence exerted on people by communal situations and social structures that are the fruit of humanity’s sin.**”^[6] Just because something is there and we can use it does not mean that the action or experience is good in itself. The limiting power of sin prevents us from seeing the gifts of creation and their beauty as pointing to the beauty of God in Christ Jesus. The negative influence which is exerted upon us, which is the fruit of humanity’s sin, means that so often we cannot see beyond the gift to the creator, which the gift is created to reveal. Somehow we get stuck and our vision is limited and the consequences are damaging and contribute to the deepening cycle of evil that wounds humanity, our planet and everything that is important to us. Somewhere St. Augustine talks about the way he lived before conversion. He describes the fact that he fell on the beautiful things that God has given and made them serve his own ends and desires without respect for the giver and his purpose. In our life and work as Christians, which is about healing in the biggest sense, we must be on a guard and ensure that all our seeing is true and free and guided by the Spirit. “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief”. Our use of the world’s gifts and the goodness of our own experiences is what is in question here. It is for us to question all the time the values and expectations that culture and society, and even politics, put before us.

Bringing Christian Wisdom to the World

Before I close I would like to invite reflection on the responsibility we have to influence decisions and actions in the

world and especially in the public arena. Given to us as the family of Christ is a tremendous treasure of wisdom and truth in the teaching derived from scripture and tradition. This body of teaching is given to us to lead us and humanity to the fullness of life and freedom from the power of evil and sin. So I would leave us with questions. Our mission to continue the healing ministry of Christ must attempt to reveal to our brothers and sisters in the world, ways that can avoid evil and bring good.

How Effective are We

How effective are we in presenting our teaching and understanding that would guide the proper expression of sexuality and respect for every human life? How courageous are we in making available the wisdom that is ours on the economy global and otherwise, markets, aid for the developing world, the ownership of property, the rights and privileges of every human being to name only a few concerns about which Christianity has much to say.

The title I have been trying to keep to in this talk is “Bringing healing to human evil”. In the countless ways that we bring the healing of Christ into our world we must do it together and this joint activity must be a priority for us all regardless of our tradition or distinctive contribution to the Christian story. I would like to close with a quotation from an encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II called “Ut Unum Sint” where he describes solidarity between Christians in the service of humanity. He says this **“It happens more and more often that leaders of Christian Communities join together in taking a stand in the name of Christ on important problems facing man’s calling and on freedom, justice, peace and the future of the world. In this way they “communicate” in one of the tasks that constitutes the mission of Christians: that of reminding society of God’s will in a realistic manner, warning the authorities and fellow citizens against taking steps which would lead to the trampling of human rights. It is clear as experience shows, that in some circumstances the united voice**

of Christians has more impact than any one isolated voice. ... Nor are the leaders of Communities the only ones joined in the work for unity. Many Christians from all communities, by reason of their faith, are jointly involved in bold projects aimed at changing the world by inculcating respect for the rights and needs of everyone, especially the poor, the lowly and defenceless ... In effect, Christians who once acted independently are now engaged together in the service of this cause, so that God's mercy may triumph.”^[7]

[1] The Confessions of St Augustine (cf The Catechism of the Catholic Church 385

[2] Luke 11,21-23

[3] Criminal Policy and the Eliminative Ideal, page 9, by Andrew Rutherford (Faculty of Law at Southampton University)

[4] Quoted in Andrew Rutherford (Op. Cit.)

[5] Quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church number 401

[6] Pope John Paul II: Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* 16

[7] Pope John Paul II: Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* 43