

On motorbikes and Popes

Yesterday, I was driving along a road in town, when a woman on a motorbike cut across in front of me, waving her hand to signal that I should give way. The testosterone flared and my hand went for the horn, but before I blasted her, I remembered that I was in Bali and not in England and let her go on her way in peace.

I have written before, on what I see as the difference in road manners between England and Bali. Traffic works in England when there is respect for the rules of the road. Traffic works in Bali when there is respect for people - and I think that of the two, Bali may well be closer to the Gospel.

One of the things I have lost, on my many journeyings from place to place, is a videotape of Pope John Paul II's visit to Britain in 1982 and this included the Mass he celebrated in Wembley stadium. It was Pentecost, when he celebrated that Mass, the birth day of the Church, and when he spoke to the gathered crowd he said,

"When I look around at this vast gathering, I am filled with awe. You are the sons and daughters of God. He loves you. I respect you."

What struck me, then and still now, is the distinction the Pope makes between the love God has for people and the respect the Pope holds them in. He does not claim to love them, for such a claim would empty the word "love" of all that makes it such a rich and life-giving experience. To truly love someone means you know them personally and rejoice in the uniqueness that makes each one special. The Pope knew that he could do that for those few, whom he was given to know and care for personally, but only God can do that for everyone. However, John Paul also knew that love has its roots in our attitude towards people and one of those roots is respect.

We use the word "love" very easily, especially when we put it forward as an ethical principle – for example, "we Christians are called to love one another" – but when we do this, we can so easily empty it of all real meaning, because, often, we do not acknowledge the roots from which it draws its life. Love is not a thing in itself, it is a kaleidoscope, made up of many parts and one of those parts is the need for a deep reverence and respect before the one who is loved. It is this aspect of love, which forbids manipulation of the beloved, seeking to change them into the image of the lover. To love someone is to want them to be free – even if that means that they use that freedom to walk away from you. St Ireneaus, whose feastday it was this past week, said, "The glory of God is in man being fully human" – that is, "in man being free". Without respect for that freedom – and more fundamentally still, respect for the person – there can be no love. If we only respect someone, we still have a long way to go on the Gospel road of love, but without that respect, we are not journeying anywhere.

So, the roads of Bali are teaching me Gospel and even when someone chooses to cut across in front of me, for what must be prime for me, is not whether she has respected the rules of the road – as understood by an Englishman – but whether I have respected her by not blowing my horn – even if she was rather silly!

Diary

I gave my first sermon in Indonesian last night. I received a phone call halfway through the day, asking me to say an anniversary Mass for a family – and to say it that evening. The Parish Priest had been held up in Jakarta and could not get

back to say it, so I agreed. I knew that this was to be in a home, with people invited, and a meal afterwards, and I also knew that a short homily would be expected, so I thought to myself that I would ask someone to translate for me. There was very little time to prepare anything, because I was at a wedding rehearsal at a town some miles away, but on the way back I started going over in my mind how I would say something if it had to be said in Indonesian. That was a most fortunate inspiration, because when I arrived at the house, I found that it was part of a Catholic enclave of rather poor people – labourers etc – and although there were about 100 people at the Mass, no one had enough English to translate for me. So, commending myself to the Holy Spirit, I spoke – not very much, but enough to receive a few nods and smiles from the people there. I have, thereby, crossed a barrier and feel that I am now part of the local church!

Three of the Bali Nine, who are under sentence of death, went before the Appeals court last Monday to plead for their lives. They wait now for the decision. They all admitted their guilt and their stupidity and asked to be given a second chance. One said, “I believe I can make a difference to the world” Another said, “I hope the Authorities will give me the chance to show that I can turn my life around”. The third said, “All I hope for is a chance to live”. These three lads are all in their early twenties. I know them. They come to Mass on Tuesdays now and then. Please remember them and their families in your prayers.

God bless,

Terry