

The power of a word

A few days ago, a friend of mine told me that he had heard that the appeal against the death sentence by three of the Bali Nine had been rejected. Fortunately, I later discovered that this was not so and the Supreme Court is still deliberating. However, in that space of time, between my friend telling me that the appeal had been rejected and discovering it to be untrue, my heart went out to those three, whom I now know as friends and I began to wonder what it must feel like to have the death sentence passed on you.

There is a saying in England, "*Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me*". How false that is! Bones can mend and the incident be forgotten, but the damage done by a condemning word sometimes never heals. When I was eleven years old, I sat for and failed the 11+ examination, which graded English children into those who were worth educating and those who were not. Still, to this day, I sometimes have to fight against a sense of failure brought on by that experience – even though my history shows that judgment to have been wrong. Fortunately, at the school I was then sent to, there was a teacher, who saw something in me and told me that I was capable of better things – and with those few words of encouragement, I began to grow. I experienced that same life-giving power of words, when friends, sent into my life, I believe, by God, encouraged me to try for my boyhood dream of being a priest. They believed in me, when I was not sure I believed in myself. Words can bring life or they can bring death. The life-givers are those who look into the heart of a person and believe in them. The death dealers are those who erect standards and then pronounce of the supposed worth of a person by measuring them up to those standards. But we never seem to ask the obvious question of: "Who measures the measurers?"

This was a problem I came up against over and over again, when working as a University Chaplain. Part of my job was to rejoice with those who got their degree, but a far more vital part of my work was with those who failed or were struggling. I tried to show them that the standards by which they judged themselves a failure were not real – they were and are artificial and arbitrary constructs invented by someone and could no way judge whether we are a success or failure as a person.

This "death-dealing" also happens when the Gospel is used as a standard or a list of expectations and we measure the worth of others against it – or, worse still, measure ourselves against it. When we do this, people fall wounded and sometimes die. And yet, a mere glance at the many stories of Jesus, related in the Gospels, should lead us to see how wrong this is. When the Lord speaks to those we would consider as failures, it is always with love and compassion. His words, in such cases, are always used to encourage and so give life. The condemnations of Jesus were reserved for those who used the Scriptures and the Tradition of Israel to judge and condemn. Jesus attacked their false sense of self-worth built on their disparagement of those they considered failures.

The Gospel is the Good News that we are loved by God – no matter who we are or what we have done or not done. This is the root and foundation of the Christian life – everything else comes from the sense of being loved and wanted. It is because of this that we say that the Gospel gives life for it is addressed to persons and not to what we can or cannot do. From my conversations with those guys on death row here, I know that this word of life has reached them. One of them told me, "In a strange way I am grateful for being in prison, for it is here that I have found God". When they handed down the death sentence, their judges in effect told them, "There is nothing in you worth saving. You are only fit to be destroyed", but another,

more powerful has also come to them – “You are loved. You are wanted”. No wonder Jesus is called “The Word”. And to think that this life-giving Word lives in us – or is supposed to!

Diary

I went to the Catholic Orphanage at Palasari, yesterday. It is always a delight to go there, for the children give me a great welcome and I am taken by them to see whatever is new. It is also a great way to practice my Indonesian and also to let them practice their English on me. It would be nice to visit more often, but it is a three hour journey there – and another three hours to come back!

Tomorrow, we are going to hold the first meeting of “The Bali International Chaplaincy”. I have asked one of the community to chair it – he is retired now, but still occasionally gives “Get up and go” sessions to businessmen. There seems to be a lot of enthusiasm for the meeting so it will be interesting to see how the Spirit leads us to get up and go!

Global warming seems to have affected us here in Bali. Last year – and the year before when I came for my first short visit here, the weather was lovely. It was sunny but not overly warm or humid. That, I am told, was typical winter weather here in Bali. However, this year, we have had a lot of clouds and while there has not been flooding, as in other parts of the world, there is still a lot of rain accompanied by a higher than usual humidity.

God bless,

Terry