

Pushing back the boundaries

I began my life as a priest amongst the Iban Dayaks of Sarawak and, because the upper reaches of the Parish had hardly been visited by priests, I spent my first two and a half years travelling up and down the rivers, for two, three or four weeks at a time, bringing with me, or so I thought, the Word of God. In those days, I still saw things very much in terms of black and white – I was Christian and they were Pagan; I had the message of salvation and they didn't. I still remember the slight frisson of awe, as I sat down in the first pagan longhouse I ever visited and saw hanging above me several heads, from the days of head-hunting. But the finger of kindness and the hospitality of these people began to stir up that black and white into shades of grey and I began to realise that the Holy Spirit had been there long before I arrived. I saw that they already knew the commandments, “you shall not kill”, “you shall not commit adultery”, “you shall not steal”. True, traditionally they understood this as “you may not kill the people of your longhouse, but you can take the heads of the people in the longhouse downriver from you”. But that is not so different from the rest of us. At the present time, someone from Britain may not kill someone in Britain, but if you are in the army in Afghanistan you can kill Taliban. It is all a matter of where the boundaries of our compassion and morality lie!

The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Love, seems, in my experience, to have reached everyone in some way. There seems to be a place in everyone's life, be that past or present, where we live in friendship with someone and into that space, be it ever so small, God comes to dwell. “Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est” - where there is love and friendship, there is God; for God is love and friendship; God is Trinity and Trinity means family. The difference between salvation and perdition is not the black and white of love and hate, for there is a little of both in all of us, but which way the boundaries are moving. Is my friendship and compassion for others becoming more inclusive? – are the boundaries moving outwards? Or are they moving inwards and excluding more and more people as they do so. Salvation is a journey, not a state.

One of the earliest catechetical documents, “*The Didache*”, written about the year AD 150, begins by saying, “There are two ways: the way of life and the way of death and you must choose which way you will go”. The Gospel is about “pushing back the boundaries” and the way we do this is through prayer. When a community of Iban asked to become Christian, the first thing we did was teach them to pray. We showed them how to celebrate the Sunday prayer, with Readings and hymns and prayers for the world.

When we think about petitionary prayer, we tend to think that if we do not pray, then God does not give. This, of course, cannot be right. As Jesus himself said, “He causes the sun to rise on good and bad alike” (Mt.5:45) so, the command to pray is given because we need it, not God. When I pray, the prayer becomes a path through my heart, a path along which the Holy Spirit can pass and reach the ones for whom I pray. His passing opens me in love for towards those for whom I pray – and my boundaries are pushed back. This is why our Tradition puts into our mouths prayers for all the world – even if at the time of saying them we can find little or no concern for those people and intentions.

However, should I only pray for myself and close family and friends and never go beyond the walls of my enclave, then my prayer will eventually turn sour. It is

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similar to my caring for my garden. I need water to make the newly planted grass and flowers grow, but, should I let water flow into my garden, but do not allow it a passage out as well, then it will turn into a stagnant pool, full of mosquitoes and sickness. So it is with the Spirit. If I do not allow the Spirit passage through the garden of my life and out onto the world at large, then the friendship of my garden will become merely a collective selfishness.

The coming of Jesus, was the beginning of God's entrance into the whole world and wherever friendship and love are to be found there God has taken up his abode. But to let him come, is also to let myself grow. I have to give myself to this movement and one way to do this is - whenever I pray for someone, who is dear to me, I should extend the boundaries by including someone who is beyond the wall of my concern – even if my heart feels cold towards them. When I do this, I give passage to the Spirit, I allow the Spirit to transform me and push my walls further out. God, as Jesus said, makes his home me and I am on the journey of salvation – as the Iban of Sarawak taught me.

Diary

Some years ago, a soldier I knew in Sarawak retired and went back to his longhouse to build a home there. Six months later, he went to his Parish Priest and asked him to bless his hands. The Parish Priest asked him if that was to help him work better on his house. “No”, replied the soldier, “It is to ask God to stop the money flowing out of my hands due to all the expenses!” I must say, I feel rather like that at the moment. I never realised how expensive it is to set up home.

I am feeling a little foolish, at the moment. In my desire to be self-sufficient, I bought a dishwasher, had it installed in the house and then set out to buy some washing powder, salt and rinse aid etc. However, I can't find any! All the big stores, I have been to, do not seem to know what I am talking about. It may be that most people have maids to do the washing up – for they are cheaper than dish-washers – and so there is not the demand for it. But, surely, they would not sell dish-washers, if they cannot be used – or would they?

The two lads, I mentioned last week, have now been helped on their way to set up small businesses. I asked a friend of mine to go and see the premises and give me their opinion – if I go and the owners see I am European, the price rises. My friends have given the go-ahead and so they have received the money and begun. Thank you all, who helped in doing this.

When I came here, I began a Thursday evening meditation Mass, which I described last week in my blog. It is a very gentle and pleasant Mass and I enjoy it very much. We began with two or three people and the number stayed stable for about a year, between two and six people, but now our numbers have begun to rise and last week we had seventeen people. I believe there is a great need for this type of prayer – for so few of us really believe that God is truly interested in each of us individually!

I have just over two weeks left before I go to Sarawak for six weeks to teach in the seminary at Kuching. I am looking forward to seeing old friends, but I am also

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rushing to finalise the course I will be teaching – Bio-ethics. When I come back, one of my nephews should be here with his family. I have warned him, though, he will have to camp out a bit as I do not have everything I need. But, it will be very nice to have them visit.

BICC News

Tuesdays 6.15pm – Bible Study/ Discussion. We have begun to work through a study of St Luke's Gospel.

Thursdays 6.30pm – Meditation Mass. In Betania, the Parish centre, which is across the road, at the back of the Church, in the upstairs Chapel.

Concert in aid of the seminary

We still need help in organising this and people to sing or play. If you can help please let me know and I will pass it on to those concerned with the organising.

Collections for April

Sorry, I forgot to publish them earlier:

06.04.08 Rp. 1,054,000

13.04.08 Rp. 2,087,000

20.04.08 Rp. 2,095,000

27.04.08 Rp. 2,358,000

Total for April Rp. 7,594,000

Thank you all very much for your support. I am most grateful.

God bless,

Terry