

On being wanted

For some time now, various people have been suddenly appearing on my chat-line, asking if we can talk. Sometimes, they are Chinese seeking to practice their English, but not always, and, if I am not too busy, I chat for a while with them. About a week or so ago, I began chatting with a young man, who, I discovered, came from a place called Mukah, which was my first parish here in Sarawak. At first, I did not tell him I was a priest and teased him a little by talking to him in his own language, Melanau, which astonished him, because it is only spoken in that Parish – and it also astonished me, because it is 34 years, since I left that Parish. When, however, he told me that he was a Catholic, I told him I was a priest and asked what his father's name was, wondering whether I knew him. The Melanaus, like many natives of Sarawak, use their own name and also their father's name, being known as "son of", and so when the lad told me his father's name, I told that I did not remember his father, but I knew his grandfather. The next day, he came back online, telling me that he had asked his family, whether they knew me and they told him that they remembered me very well – and that his grandfather, long since dead, had even named one of his grandsons after me, "Terry", when I left the Parish. I told the lad that I was going to pay a short visit to Mukah to visit the present Parish Priest, a good friend of mine, and that maybe he would like to meet for a chat over a cup of coffee, while I was there. The next day, he came back and said that his family also wanted me to visit them – and have a family party with them!

This has made me sit back and wonder why I am remembered with such affection after so many years. When I was appointed to Mukah, in 1971, my Bishop told me to learn the language of the upriver people, the Iban, with a view to taking over from the priest, who looked after that area, and so I travelled among the Iban, struggling to learn something of the language and the work. But, I could not travel all the time and so a lot of my time was spent down-river at Mukah, among the Melanau. Because of this, I learnt how to say Mass in Melanau and give a simple homily, which someone would translate for me and I visited the kampongs (villages), including this lad's kampong, usually by boat – but once or twice, I remember, on foot, walking through the mud to get there. I would say Mass, baptise the children, visit the sick, bury the dead – just ordinary, everyday things. I also remember, on one or two occasions, visiting the people in their houses, with the catechist along as interpreter, trying to get to know them better – battling with both a language I hardly knew and my shyness as a young man - asking simple questions, such as, "How are the family?", "How many children have you?" and then going home afterwards wondering whether I was wasting my time. So the memories of my time there are not of a glorious, skilful apostolate, but the bumbings of a young priest, trying to care for his people.

And these memories conjure up other memories of other times and other places. I remember becoming close friends with a black man in New Orleans, who asked me to pray for his sister, who had tried to commit suicide. Our friendship began because I walked through the streets that night alone to visit his sister. I remember also, as a newly ordained priest, visiting a prisoner in the punishment cells of Wandsworth Jail, where I was supplying, and for several years after that, he used to write to me and I wrote to him – and this was a man the prison officers were frightened of, because he was so violent. I remember also other occasions and

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situations, when I wanted to be of help, but I did not know what to say or do, but, nevertheless, something happened. Looking back, it seems that my feeling of helplessness was often the means by which the Lord worked most effectively through me.

We sometimes think that it is what we do or say on such occasions is what is most important, but, more and more, I see that it is the heart that wants to care, which is effective, not the action or word itself. St Vincent de Paul, a man dedicated to helping the poor, told a new Sister of Charity, who was just beginning her mission to care for the poor, “The poor are terrible masters, but you must love them. For only when you love them will they forgive you for the bread you give them to eat”. We can do such damage by putting good works or doctrines in place of that love, for it can hide the fact that the Gospel, the Good News, is first and foremost: “You are special, you are wanted, you are loved”. St. Francis had it right when he said, “Go out and preach the Good News with all your might – and if you have to, use words”. So, maybe that young priest plodding through the mud to visit people he hardly knew and then, when he arrived, didn’t know what to say to them, was, in fact, doing a lot more than he knew. The people in that kampong, I last visited 34 years ago, seem to think so.

Diary

As I have said, people sometimes “pop up” on my pc messenger, one of whom was the lad I speak of above. I am not sure how they get my address, but sometimes they are interesting people. There was another lad, who called about ten days ago, and he lives in Siberia! I think he is just lonely and so I chat with him if I can. Last Thursday, I told him that I could not talk because I was going out to play ten-pin bowling and he asked me what that was. Interested question – how do you describe ten-pin bowling to someone who has never seen it? After a few attempts, I asked him what recreation facilities there were where he lived. He replied, “What is recreation?” and when I explained he said, “I smoke, I drink and I walk”. He is 31.

I played ten pin bowling with three of the priests from the College here – all younger than me – and I won two games out of four. How about that? However, I should tell you that two of them had never played before! And also, two days later, I was hobbling about with previously under-used muscles complaining about being abused.

The seminary building here in Kuching was erected just after I left in 1984, but it now needs an extension and that is going on apace, but is still in the initial stages, that is pile-driving! It is amazing, however, how you can blot out a noise like that when you are working – and also when you are teaching. It is interesting that you cannot do the same thing, when listening to a telephone conversation and there is a lot of background noise. Our ears are obviously not just a hearing instrument – there is much more going on than that. It is the difference between hearing and listening – I think there is a sermon in there somewhere!

Today, in Malaysia, is Fathers’ Day, so from this unmarried Father, “Happy Fathers’ Day” to all you dads out there.

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God bless,

Terry