

Oh, the inexpressible joy of Evensong, that work of Anglican genius which no other part of Christendom has ever quite been able to replicate! Some years ago BBC-TV produced a lovely homage to Evensong, set in Winchester, where we met an elderly woman who had suffered the painful loss of her young brother in WW1 as well as her beloved husband later in life. We accompany her as she shuts the front door of her small house and walks through the dark, wet streets to the great cathedral to sit with a small group of people in the canons' stalls to hear the choir sing Evensong, something she does most evenings of the week. She tells us in a gentle interview how much this Office means to her as the themes of evening and the fading of the light intertwine with those of other endings, not least of them the ending of our lives. There is something about it which puts everything into hope-filled perspective. As all things must pass, only the love and tender mercy of God endure. It is a space for healing, and thankfulness. I wonder, do you think, would a few doses of Evensong do some good for our Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, if they were to sit and kneel side by side, letting the quiet contemplation of the passing of all things seep into their spirits?

I'm not entirely joking, you understand. Because it seems to me that we are living in disturbingly adversarial times, and not only in the legislative halls of Canberra. Anger, conflict and intransigence stalk the land in national and international life, in community and family life and, just where we might hope for the opposite, even within the Body of Christ. Lines are drawn in the sand, positions taken and held, condemnations issued, and the high moral ground gets more crowded every day.

Just occasionally, though, something happens which seems to open a window through which light streams and fresh air blows. One such moment came a few days ago when a gentle man stood up before a crowd in Birmingham and joined his voice in a call for peace. Tariq Jahan had held his son Haroon's broken body in his arms in the aftermath of the ugly riots. Many a father might have called for revenge, or at the very least for justice, but all he wanted was to be an agent of healing in the midst of grief and anger.

And I immediately remembered the astonishing prayer which was written by the late Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti of Iran, after his son had been gunned down by Islamic fanatics. Let me share it with you:

O God,  
We remember not only Bahram but also his murderers;  
Not because they killed him in the prime of his youth  
and made our hearts bleed and our tears flow,  
Not because with this savage act they have brought  
further disgrace on the name of our country among  
the civilized nations of the world;  
But because through their crime we now follow thy foot-  
steps more closely in the way of sacrifice.  
The terrible fire of this calamity burns up all selfishness  
and possessiveness in us;  
Its flame reveals the depth of depravity and meanness  
and suspicion, the dimension of hatred and the  
measure of sinfulness in human nature;

It makes obvious as never before our need to trust in  
God's love as shown in the cross of Jesus and his  
resurrection;  
Love which makes us free from hate towards our  
persecutors;  
Love which brings patience, forbearance, courage,  
loyalty, humility, generosity, greatness of heart;  
Love which more than ever deepens our trust in God's  
final victory and his eternal designs for the Church  
and for the world;  
Love which teaches us how to prepare ourselves to face  
our own day of death.

O God,  
Bahram's blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in  
the soil of our souls;  
So when his murderers stand before thee on the day of  
judgement  
Remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have  
enriched our lives,  
And forgive.<sup>1</sup>

So many things lie at the heart of our divisions and our conflicts, of course – pride, self-righteousness, possessiveness, greed, judgementalism. But surely the most basic of them all is fear, in all its forms. How moving, then, it is to hear again the story of the sons of Jacob as they are brought before their brother Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery and who now held their lives in his power.<sup>2</sup> *What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us,* they say, *'and pays us back for all the wrong that we did to him?'* But Joseph says to them, *'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?'*

That's really it, isn't it? Peace can only come, bridges can only be built when we stop playing God. When we acknowledge our common humanity and allow God to be God. Once again, it is death, and the ending of things that puts hatred and conflict into perspective. *'I am about to die,'* Joseph says, *'but God will surely come to you ...'* As his death draws near, all he can see before him are brothers, not enemies, and even their past injustice to him can become the catalyst by which they are brought closer than ever. It is a sacred mystery, and one I find hard to get my head around, that the things which divide us can actually be the means by which we are brought together. Can this be true?

I know I'm not alone in having come almost to the point of despair as I watch my beloved Anglican Church tear itself apart in so many places and so many ways. Whatever happened to our great gifts of forbearance, of allowing a thousand flowers of tradition and teaching to bloom?

Well, maybe we need to endure this pain, and even contemplate the dying of things we hold dear in order to see more clearly the things which bind us together, to see ourselves as God sees us, not as we presume to see each other.

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, *A Father's Prayer upon the Murder of his Son*, in "The Lord of the Journey – a reader in Christian spirituality," Collins, London 1986

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 50.15 – Exodus 1.7

Clearly Paul was wrestling with the same matters. A devout and committed Jew trained in the Pharisaic tradition, he finds himself excommunicated and shunned by his beloved spiritual community, and all because he has responded to God's call to see a new Way as disciple of Jesus. To make the division even deeper, he now actively recruits Gentiles into the community of faith. But he is able to see even the pain of schism and rejection as the means of grace. Writing to the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome,<sup>3</sup> he warns them against self-righteousness:

*So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. **And so all Israel will be saved ...** As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election **they are beloved.** ... For God has imprisoned all in disobedience **so that he may be merciful to all.***

He's right, of course. This is nothing less than a mystery. And one which we can only embrace with joy and awe. The anguish of conflict and bitterness can be the means by which God may bring us to discern the things that unite us, the things that really matter. I know this to be true. God has brought me to the evening time of that ministry and discipleship to which I was first called, and that evening reflection has brought me the deep peace and joy of being able to lay gently to rest old battles and struggles, discovering in their place a fresh astonishment in the beauty and eternal nature of the hope that is in us.

The nay-sayers and the secularists and the born-again atheists are having a field day lately, gloating over what they describe as the death-throes of the Church of God, preaching their dismal doctrine of the foolishness of faith. Well, I have news for them – because from where I sit in the evening light, I discern a new spirit abroad among God's people: small but increasingly vital Christian communities like ours in South Yarra and Richmond, and many more, who are taking faith more seriously than ever, having the courage to let some things go, to question and search, and to find new ways of living The Way more simply and joyfully than ever before. I reckon we're living in interesting and exciting times.

*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!, Paul says. How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!*<sup>4</sup>

That, dear friends, is eternal truth – every evening, and in the morning light.

*David Conolly  
Associate Priest  
St Stephen's Richmond*

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 11.25-36

<sup>4</sup> Romans 11.33