

Poverty and Faith

Fr. Padraig Shelley(Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin)

“It is together in solidarity that we shall continue to address the injustices of our world. It is together in solidarity that we shall allay the fears of the vulnerable and the oppressed. It is together in solidarity that we shall build the Kingdom of God.”

Giacomo Puccini, the Italian composer, has given the world many famous and beautiful operas. His legacy is a long and distinguished one, with works such as *Madame Butterfly*, *Tosca* and *La Boheme* performed regularly and celebrated throughout the world. Cavanaugh (1992: 81) tells the story of how, in 1922, as Puccini worked on the opera *Turandot* he was diagnosed with cancer and fell gravely ill. In light of the prognosis he had received from his doctors, Puccini decided to gather his students around him and asked them to finish the opera if he died before its completion. A short time later he passed away.

Upon his death, and in an effort to respond to their master’s parting wish, some of Puccini’s students carefully gathered the notes and arias left behind and attempted to complete this opera drawing upon the example given to them. Puccini’s memory inspired them greatly and they completed the opera a number of years later. In 1926, the opera was performed in Milan under the directorship of Arturo Toscanini, himself a student of Puccini. During the performance, when they reached the point where illness had prevented Puccini from proceeding any further, Toscanini halted proceedings. With tears in his eyes he turned to the audience and said: “Thus far the Master wrote, but he died.” After a poignant moment of silence Toscanini said with great pride, “but the disciples finished his work.”

As followers of Christ we have been entrusted with a similar task; to complete the Masters work. For our Christian faith is not merely about our inner spiritual journey, but about creating something beautiful with our lives and our talents. Sometimes it is difficult for us to discern how we can bring this about in a real and concrete way. We need some inspiration and guidance. For us to gain that insight, we make a journey towards the Lord; a journey that has two fundamental elements to it; *becoming* and *giving*¹. The Lord is our model and guide. It is to Him that we look to for a vision in which to invest our energy; it is in His tender care that we place our dreams and hopes. It is with His help that we *become* people who can

realise our true potential in life. The more that we drink from this wellspring of inspiration, the more we find a resonance in the words of the psalmist: “Your word is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path” (Ps 119:105).

So, where does this path lead us? As we leaf through the scriptures and ponder the gospel stories we find that the Lord’s vision is most often found when He speaks of the *kingdom of God*². When Jesus shared this message in the towns and villages of Galilee his words struck a chord in the hearts of those who sought some hope for their lives. Many people wished that a just and kindly ruler would reign in their land bringing support and protection for the helpless, the weak and the poor (Mt. 19:21)³; that an empathy and understanding would be shown to those struggling in life; and that the voiceless could receive a sympathetic and fair hearing (Lk. 14:12-14)⁴. And upon receiving the words of Jesus, many ordinary people found an answer to their need; for many the Kingdom meant *liberation*⁵ from injustice and poverty. The Lord became their light of hope to dispel the darkness and transform⁶ their lives with his peace⁷. He became their Saviour. To this very day, the Lord’s message continues to illuminate our world in a similar manner. He is gently pointing us in the direction of the Kingdom whilst also telling us that the Kingdom is in the here and now. The Lord invites us to play our part in building up the kingdom for it is in *giving* to this task that we shall truly receive (Lk. 12: 23-33)⁸.

In the words of the Second Vatican Council (1965) the Kingdom is “a new dwelling place and a new earth where justice will abide, and whose blessedness will answer and surpass all the longings for peace which spring up in the human heart” (Gaudium et Spes, n.39). Just imagine a place where justice will abide. Just ponder a place which offers us such peace, fulfilment and contentment. Just think of the great hope that exists and flourishes when the message of Christ prevails. Just visualise a place where each person is valued and cherished. This is what the Lord has asked us to build with our lives of service⁹ to his message.

When we have this understanding of faith, the kingdom of God becomes both our mission and our place of refuge; it is our Christian calling to build up the Kingdom, and also to share in its beauty. And so we are called in a very real way to be instruments of justice and peace in our world; we have been given this mission by the Lord himself. We have been commissioned and sent forth into our world with this brave and wonderful task.

We do not take on this task alone, for over the centuries our church has set itself the task of building up the Kingdom. Its teachings¹⁰ have sought to forward a vision where justice and

peace are valued, and where solidarity and unity are the foundation stones for cherishing such an ethos. In 1967, with the publication of *Populorum Progressio*, this “call to action¹¹” inspired our church to advance the kingdom in many new and different directions¹². This document stressed the need for *integral* development which could not be seen as merely economic development, but also ‘growth in knowledge, in culture and in the necessities of life – of the whole person, in other words’ (Walsh et al, 1984: 141). The beauty of this vision, and its great strength, saw the value of cherishing the whole person.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, speaking about the value of the individual person, once said: “I believe in the essential unity of all people and for that matter of all lives. Therefore, I believe that if one person gains spiritually, the whole world gains, and if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent”. Such is the sentiment of our Church. Whether we live in an Irish setting, or in Honduras or in Sub Saharan Africa, we all wish for the gentle light of hope to continue to flicker in our hearts and the hearts of our families and loved ones. Our work of development builds up that hope and assuages worries. It is together in solidarity that we will continue to address the injustices of our world. It is together in solidarity that we shall allay the fears of the vulnerable and the oppressed. It is together in solidarity that we shall build the Kingdom of God.

Ghandi also said that: “the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” Our Lenten Campaign is an invitation to do just that. During this time make a private resolution in your own heart to create a bond of solidarity with those in the developing world. This solidarity with people is the true living out of our faith. That is what makes our Lenten Campaign each year something special, for it enables the hands of solidarity and friendship to meet and join and embrace across continents and cultures. Each Lenten season ordinary people from different sides of the globe are united. We, in Ireland, make a connection with our brothers and sisters in the developing world. Through our reading of the Lenten resources we can hear a different story; through our faith we can share common hopes; through our action we can unite in solidarity against injustice and inequality. When all is stripped away, the strength and value of the Lenten campaign each year is in the opportunity it offers for people to connect with one another in an inclusive and caring manner.

Our Lenten Campaign this year once again speaks out against poverty, injustice, greed and unfairness. Into the harsh reality of our world all we can do is advance the values of the Kingdom with courage, determination and vigour. This year we visit Honduras in Central

America. It is an opportunity to listen to the story of families dispossessed from their lands; struggling against the might of wealthy landlords, intent on extending their empires in the pursuit of profits and at the cost of the poor and vulnerable. In the face of such injustice we offer solidarity, faith and hope. We remember the words of scripture:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 23:22)

Puccini's opera, *Turandot*, contains the famous aria *Nessun Dorma*. The title literally means *None Shall Sleep*. During this holy season of Lent let us not sleep when such Poverty and injustice are prevalent in our world; let us not sleep when we have a beautiful opportunity to build up the Kingdom; let us not sleep when we can care for our brothers and sisters across the globe.

Padraig Shelley, Kildare & Leighlin.

Bibliography

- Bishops of Ireland**, 1973, *Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Ireland on the establishment of Trócaire, the Irish Catholic Agency for World Development* (Dublin: Trócaire)
- Boff, L.**, 1987, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Kent, England: Burns & Oates/Search Press Ltd)
- Cavanaugh, B.**, 1992, *More Sower's Seeds: Second Planting* (New Jersey: Paulist Press)
- Corkery, P.**, 2007, *Companion to the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Dublin: Veritas Publications)
- Ferm, D.**, 1988, *Third World Liberation Theologies: an Introductory Survey* (New York: Orbis Books)
- Gutiérrez, G.**, 1988, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press Ltd)
- Kasper, W.**, 1985, *Jesus the Christ* (Kent: Burns & Oates)
- Kilcullen, J.**, in International Jesuit Network for Development, 2007, *The Development of Peoples: Challenges for Today and Tomorrow: Essays to Mark the Fortieth Anniversary of Populorum Progressio* (Dublin: The Columba Press)
- Leahy, B. (Ed.)**, 2005, *No Peace without Justice, No Justice without Forgiveness: Messages for Peace From Pope John Paul II* (Dublin: Veritas Publications)
- McBrien, R.**, 1989, *Catholicism* (London: Winston Press)

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Dublin: Veritas Publications Ltd.)

Walsh, M., and Davies, B., 1984, *Proclaiming Justice and Peace: Documents from John XXIII to John Paul II* (Dublin: Collins Liturgical Publications)

¹Francis Dewar on discussing the writings of Teilhard de Chardin (1992: 54).

²Walter Kasper comments that the “centre and framework of Jesus’ preaching and mission was the approaching Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God was what it was about” (1985: 72)

³Mt. 19:21 Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

⁴Lk. 14:12-14 Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

⁵The birth of Liberation Theology saw the emergence of a new approach to both theology and development, and also the very image of Christ depicted by the church. Leonardo Boff portrayed Christ as the liberator who ‘calls us to correct action (orthopraxis) even more than to correct beliefs (orthodoxy)’ (Ferm, 1988: 30). He went on to say: ‘There is a prophetic calling coming from liberation theology, in that it denounces the causes that produce oppression, and inspires an outpouring of generosity destined to overcome destructive relationships and build freedom for everyone’ (Boff, 1987: 88). Gustavo Gutiérrez saw theology not merely as an instrument to convince non-believers about Christianity, but as means of freeing the oppressed from their inhuman living conditions.

⁶McBrien draws upon H. Richard Niebuhr’s idea of the five relationships which Christ has to culture, one being the conversionist motif or Christ the Transformer. (p. 387). This concept is a strong theme in St. John’s Gospel.

⁷Kasper suggests that the Kingdom incorporates the idea of the eschatological shalom; a peace between nations, between individuals, within the individual person and throughout the whole universe. He concluded that “the Kingdom of God must be seen in the context of mankind’s search for peace, freedom, justice and life” (1985: 73).

⁸Lk. 12:32-33 “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.

⁹ This is our common calling to diakonia.

¹⁰In 1891, *Rerum Novarum* was published offering a ‘new path’ (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005: 44) for workers’ rights. Pope Pius XI, in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) stressed the need for a new social order based upon justice and charity.

¹¹Kilcullen, 2007: 14.

¹² *Populorum Progressio* was a seminal document that eventually saw the establishment of Trócaire in Ireland. In the intervening years, Trócaire has endeavoured to keep this prophetic message alive in the hearts of people throughout Ireland.