

Sermon for July 25, 2010

On Thursday, July 22, Archbishop Rowan Williams addressed the 11th Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Stuttgart, Germany which meets every six years. His address reflected the theme of the assembly “Give us Today our Daily Bread.” This phrase is also part of the Gospel text from Luke in the Revised Common Lectionary for this Sunday. I have read many interpretations of this text, but none as profound for our time. He says the bread for today is that which calls us to recognize human dignity in one another and is what calls us to share the truth of what humanity is in the eyes of God. He proclaims that we feed each other by honoring the truth of the divine image in each other. In connecting the feeding to forgiveness, he describes forgiveness as “a radical way in which to nourish one another’s humanity.” Forgiveness, he says, is “the exchange of the bread of life and the bread of truth; it is the way in which those who have damaged each other’s humanity and denied its dignity are brought back into a relation where each feeds the other and nurtures their dignity.”

'Give us this day our daily bread' thus becomes a prayer that asks God to sustain in us the sense of our humanity in its fullness and its richness; to give us those relations with other human beings that will keep us human, aware of our mortality and our need, yet confident that we are loved. It is a prayer to be reminded of our need: let us never forget, we pray, that we have to be fed, and that we cannot generate for ourselves all we need to live and flourish. And at the same time, it is a prayer that we shall not be ashamed of our mortality, our physical and vulnerable being. We start from need – where else can we start? But that is a way into understanding how and why we matter, why we are valuable. The prayer poses a critical question to anyone who imagines that they can begin from a position of self-sufficiency; it affirms that to be in need of this 'bread of truth', in need of material or spiritual nurture, is in no way a failure but, on the contrary, a place of dignity. The prayer both challenges the arrogance of those who think they are not in need and establishes that the needy are fully possessed of a treasure that needs to be uncovered and released, the humanity that draws them into mutual relation.

Part of what we are praying for in these words is the grace to receive our own humanity as a gift. We ask for openness and gratefulness to whoever and whatever awakens us to our dignity and helps us realise that, while our dignity is essentially and primarily given in our creation, it is

always in need of being called into active life by relation, by the gift of others. And the implication is clear that we should in doing this pray to be kept awake to what we owe to the neighbour in terms of gift; their humanity depends on ours as ours does on theirs..... Praying for our daily bread is praying to be reacquainted with our vulnerability, to learn how to approach each other, not only to approach God, with our hands open. So to pray this prayer with integrity, we need to be thinking about the various ways in which we defend ourselves. We cannot fully and freely pray for our daily bread when we are wedded inseparably to our own rightness or righteousness, any more than we can when we are wedded to our own security or prosperity. And perhaps this explains why the Lord's Prayer at once goes on to pray for forgiveness, or rather for the gift of being forgiven as we have learned to forgive. The person who asks forgiveness is a person who has renounced the privilege of being right or safe; he has acknowledged that he is hungry for healing, for the bread of acceptance and restoration to relationship. But equally the person who forgives has renounced the safety of being locked into the position of the offended victim; he(she) has decided to take the risk of creating afresh a relationship known to be dangerous, known to be capable of causing hurt. Both the giver and the receiver of forgiveness have moved out of the safety zone; they have begun to ask how to receive their humanity as a gift.

Forgiveness is one of the most radical ways in which we are able to nourish one another's humanity. When offence is given and hurt is done, the customary human response is withdrawal, the reinforcing of the walls of the private self, with all that this implies about asserting one's own humanity as a possession rather than receiving it as gift. The unforgiven and the unforgiving cannot see the other as someone who is part of God's work of bestowing humanity on them. To forgive and to be forgiven is to allow yourself to be humanised by those whom you may least want to receive as signs of God's gift; but this process is intrinsically connected with the prayer for daily bread. To deny the possibilities of forgiveness would be to say that there are those I have no need of because they have offended me or because they have refused to extend a hand to me.

To forgive is clearly the mark of a humanity touched by God – free from anxiety about identity and safety, free to reach out into what is other, as God does in Jesus Christ. But it may be that willingness to be forgiven is no less the mark of a humanity touched by God. It is a matter of being prepared to acknowledge that I cannot grow or flourish without restored relationship,

even when this means admitting the ways I have tried to avoid it. When I am forgiven by the one I have injured, I both accept that I have damaged a relationship, and accept that change is possible. And if the logic of the Lord's Prayer is correct, that acceptance arises from and is strengthened by our own freedom to bring about the change that forgiveness entails.

Forgiveness is the exchange of the bread of life and the bread of truth; it is the way in which those who have damaged each other's humanity and denied its dignity are brought back into a relation where each feeds the other and nurtures their dignity. It is a gross distortion of forgiveness that sees it as a sort of claim to power over the other – being a patron or a benefactor towards someone less secure...To forgive is to share in the helplessness of God, who cannot turn from God's own nature: not to forgive would be for God a wound in the divine life itself. Not power but the powerlessness of the God whose nature is love is what is shown in the act of forgiving. The believer rooted in Christ shares that powerlessness, and the deeper the roots go the less possible it is not to forgive. And to be forgiven is another kind of powerlessness – recognising that I cannot live without the word of mercy, that I cannot complete the task of being myself without the healing of what I have wounded. Neither the forgiver nor the forgiven acquires the power that simply cuts off the past and leaves us alone to face the future: both have discovered that their past, with all its shadows and injuries, is now what makes it imperative to be reconciled so that they may live more fully from and with each other.

The Archbishop concludes his address by saying:

" 'Give us this day our daily bread' is thus a prayer for the fullness of the Church to be made manifest: in a pattern of recognising our own need and the neighbour's, and being able to turn with confidence to each other so that the need may be met; in the desire for the freedom to forgive and be forgiven; in the fuller understanding of the Eucharist as the centre of our Christian identity ... a foundation for community, a sharing of bread embedded in a practice of shared life, flowing out into the service of the world's hunger. It is a prayer, simply, for Christ to be our food and sustenance, so that all self-sufficient pride, all individual anxiety and defensiveness, all greedy effort to live at the expense of the neighbour are overcome; and the Church declares with clarity and conviction that there is indeed bread for the world's hunger to be found in the Body of the Lord. May that clarity and conviction – and the repentant self-awareness that goes with it – be always ours."