

“I was a stranger and you make me welcome” (Mt.25,35).
Biblical and Theological Perspective

Archbishop Patrick Kelly

I begin with the Easter Vigil. One of the Old Testament Readings must always be proclaimed. It is taken from the Book of Exodus: it is the only occasion when the proclamation does not end with the declaration: This is the Word of the Lord: but immediately it breaks out into the song: “I will sing to the Lord, glorious his triumph”. The setting we sing at the Cathedral here will be in our morning prayer on Saturday. But I always feel some discomfort: the reason: just before that song of joy, the reader tell us: “and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the sea shore.” What is it like for our sisters and brothers in Egypt and across the Middle East for whom the decision to create the State of Israel affects life so profoundly to sing after such a declaration.

We can find in Deuteronomy a command: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10.19). But such a command is inseparable from stories of “A wondering Aramean was my father The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand . . . and gave us this Land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deuteronomy 26, 1-11). And that gift included: “You may take as your booty the women, the children, livestock and everything else in the town, all its spoil ... as for the towns of those peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive”. (Deuteronomy 20. 10-18).

And when it comes to stories in the book of Judges we could use that description of unacceptable teaching: “offensive to pious ears”.

In seeking a biblical foundation for the concerns that have brought us together, migration, land, resources, we may not be satisfied because we have one or two comfortable texts. During the Synod on the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church two convictions were held in tension: we may not be true to the Lord Jesus and set aside the Old Testament: but we may not be true to that purpose of the wisdom and love of God that comes to fullest light when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1,14) and refuse to face up to this delicate task: what in the Scriptures belongs to a particular time and place and what is for all times and all places.

And the Lord Jesus “who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning” (Hebrews 4.15), had himself to learn to break out of the presumptions, the prejudices formed in the “race of whom, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen”. (Romans 9.1-5). It was part of the air he breathed that appreciation of the loving wisdom, wisest love of God, could only be found in that people of whom it is said, “Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard it, and lived? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation ... as the Lord your God did for you?” (Deuteronomy 4.32-40).

But one day this is the conversation, the learning, process accepted by him of whom we proclaim: “He reflects the glory of God” (Hebrews 1.3) “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2.3).

And from there he arose and went out to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house, and would not have any one know it; yet he could not be hid. But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was Greek, a Syro-phoenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread, and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs". And he said to her "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone" (Mark 8.24-30)

The Syro-Phoenician woman was a stranger and Jesus offered her the deepest assurance of welcome: he learnt from her, a woman, a pagan, the ways of his God and Father and was liberated by her wisdom from the presumptions and prejudices of his race and culture.

And let the meeting with one woman lead us to consider a meeting which it is clear was an imperative only understood as part of this: "so must the Son of Man be lifted up ... For God so loved the world" (John 3.14-17). Jesus had to go by Samaria, just as he had to stay in Zacchaeus' house in Jericho, because God is love (Luke 19.1-10; 1 John 4.7) This is water from the well in Samaria, "and the well is deep". (John 4.11).

On every visit I have made to the Holy Land, that is the only place where everyone seems impelled to read more than once the fourth chapter of Saint John's gospel. It is the conversation we must all have with the Lord. And it includes words that differentiate our relationship to land, buildings, possessions at least from the Jewish faith and the Muslim religion. And since the flash-point among all others in tensions between migrants, about space, finding a homeland, is a hill top in Jerusalem, we are confronted by this word of the Lord, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming, when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth". For such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him in spirit and truth" (John 4.21-24). And the Spirit, "the gift of God . . . a spring of water welling up to eternal life," (John 4.10:14), is the Spirit that flows when Jesus is glorified (John 7. 37-39) and "one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear" (John 19. 31-37). Now the Spirit we receive is not "a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, and love and self-control" (2 Timothy 1-7). Worship in spirit does mean worship without matter, bodies, or heart: it means the worship of those who have been "born of water and the Spirit". (John 3.5). The Spirit renews the face of the earth because it is the Spirit flowing from the heart of Jesus, who forgives, endures in patience, uses only the resources of the poorest of the poor. He is the Lamb: his kingdom is not of this world. (John 18. 36; Book of Revelation passim). And the truth is not just of the mind but is surely fidelity and is that way so often praised in the Book of Revelation: patient endurance. (Revelation 2.2; 2.19; 3.10).

And the worship of the Lord Jesus is that accomplished (Luke 12.49 F; 13, 31-35; John 19. 30) in this place: Jerusalem: so the veil is torn down (Matthew 27.51) for "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5.16- 6.10). And not the Romans (John 11.45-53) but the death of Jesus means the holy place, and elite nation, is no longer needed: no need for a seven branch candlestick, soon to be carried off by Titus to Rome, for now "the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." (Revelation 21.22-22.5).

So a new way: not of conquest: or domination, but a mission entrusted to an eleven even though "some doubted" (Matthew 28.17). But this makes sense because the task is not to inform, teach, but to "make disciples" (Matthew 28.19). And those who sit at his feet will learn this and only this: "learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart". (Matthew 11.29). And "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth". (Matthew 5.5).

It is strange but while both Jews and Muslims must in fidelity to the ways of God as they read them claim absolute and exclusive access to one small place on earth, the disciples of the Lord need make no such absolute and exclusive claim. We are brought into a radical re-interpretation of the earth, its resources, ownership, and responsibility. I commend as a paradigm for an understanding of migration, economics and migration, for asylum seeking, this book: *The Land, the Bible and History* by Alain Marchadour and David Neuhaus.

Although it is primarily about the Holy Land it implies that issues of how those who live there need to relate to that land is perhaps a key to but certainly leads on to reflect on how any of us relate to the Land. And above all else: "The Lord's is the earth and its fullness": the earth and its fullness is entrusted to us made in the image and likeness not of a technocratic, productive, manufacturing God, but an artistic, creative God who delights in seeing, "indeed it was very good". (Genesis 1.31).

And we are wise to attend to this wisdom from Pope Benedict:

"We could easily stop here to consider how salutary it would be for our society today if families set aside one day a week to stay together and make their home the dwelling place and the fulfilment of communion in God's rest."

In summary: the biblically based theology of our symposium is not rooted in isolated texts: it needs an approach to the Scriptures wise by cultural awareness, literary taste for poetry and a willingness to be profoundly changed by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Because we meet in Liverpool one more step is needed: this city became rich because of the slave trade: ships sailed from Africa with slaves: they came here with cargoes of sugar, tobacco, cotton, wood. You can still see next to the River Mersey the largest warehouse for tobacco in the world: derelict now but a vivid reminder of very prosperous industries. The ships sailed back to Africa with the products of industry here and so the evil triangle was complete. I pray a merciful God has taken account of how not that long ago thousands from the city died on land and out at sea to rid the world of the evils of National Socialism.

But as we ponder slavery in the context of Europe and Africa and seek a biblical foundation for our reflection I note: Saint Paul only got as far as saying: "Slaves obey you earthly masters with fear and trembling Render service with enthusiasm as to the Lord ... And, masters, do the same to them". (Ephesians 6.5-9).

I think we may understand why Saint Paul did not simply condemn slavery. And this will also show how delicate and demanding is the task to work out, with the Scriptures as the essential basis, theological responses for issues affecting every day.

Saint Paul took it for granted that the human story had not been that long, that the human race was relatively unified in culture: so now that God has spoken as his Word, his only Son, God has spoken his final word; and so the future will be short: there is no need to tackle such an issue as slavery: it will all soon be at an end.

But we know the universe is billions of years old: the human race is tens of thousands years old, the human race has great cultural, social, economic diversity.

And so over the centuries new questions have arisen to which the Scriptures by themselves do not give an answer.

We are wise to remember this: the conviction of the evil of the slave trade and the determination to stop it was largely due to a layman, a politician, not a Catholic: William Wilberforce. And next time you are in Rome if you want to see the name Wilberforce go to the Church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva: go down the right aisle to the last chapel: on the wall you will see a plaque to Robert Isaac Wilberforce and at your feet the vault for this son of William Wilberforce: like his friend John

Henry Newman, he had become a Catholic: but this holy, outstanding theologian, while studying to be a priest, died.

From this reflection I suggest: we need what Hans Urs Von Balthasar, especially in his book, *Bernanos*, would describe as a non-clerical theology. As we reflect on the slavery of today, and now the consequences of the economic turmoil, the consequences of the structures of trade, there is no ready-made biblical answer or complete theological foundation.

We need lay men and women, authentic disciples of the Lord, will show us all how to assess, judge, respond to the economic, social political situation.

An authentic disciple is someone who ponders the crucified Christ, his wounds in hands, feet and side and accepts this question from a poem called: "The Shroud".

"How is this image made
in us? We are afraid
always to go further
from father and mother
into the wounded side,
where ever to abide
will always be to move
and to be moved by love

Those who open their hearts to the love of God, the love by which God loves, as they business, or buy, or sell, or serve as politicians or leaders, or economies, are the ones without whom we cannot understand, judge, decide how Africa and Europe must relate in the 21st century, a Century that still carries the consequences of the trade in slaves.