

The Church in the world: a reflection on the Road to Emmaus and on the forced retirement of Bishop Bill Morris of Toowoomba (preached at Kippax May 8th 2011)

The gospel presents us with a scene of two men on a journey away from the place of their hopes and dreams. Many of us (perhaps all of us) identify with them. They found someone (Jesus) who gave direction and meaning to their lives. They invested their time and their energy in him and in his agenda, but he was dead now and their dreams were buried with him in the tomb. There were those who talked about carrying on. Some even claimed that Jesus was still working with them. They were too disillusioned to listen. We see them leaving their dreams behind and heading off for what was familiar before they were caught up in the Jesus' movement.

But it is not that simple. As they reflect back they start to make sense even of his death. Later they recall the stirring they experienced in their hearts. It was when they did what Jesus had asked them to do, when they broke bread together, when they experienced the communion that had bound them to Jesus and to each other, that they knew they had to go back to Jerusalem and renew contact with the community. They knew that the mysterious encounter they had experienced was an encounter with the same humble and gentle Jesus with whom they had forged a strong bond. They wanted him to stay with the others and be faithful to continuing the mission Jesus had entrusted to them. They wanted to break bread with him. It was this longing, this burning in their hearts, that persuaded them that they must reconnect. They hurried back and were delighted that the community welcomed the story of their journey, and assured them that others had been through a similar experience, significantly Simon Peter whom Jesus had selected to take over leadership of the community.

Jesus had pleaded with them at the Last Supper to love one another with the same love that they had experienced from him.

I see the two on their journey as symbols of all who are struggling to make sense of life, wanting to contribute in a meaningful way, but coming up against our own weakness and the weaknesses of those around us. So many dreams unfulfilled, so much hope dashed, so many small and large candles snuffed out. The church is graced and called to be the heart of Jesus in our world, journeying with us, a source of enlightenment, encouragement, and truth – significantly the truth that God is love. Like Jesus in Emmaus, the church waits to be invited in by hearts that are glowing with longing because they sense in the Christian community a place where their dreams are respected and their contribution honoured.

Next month I will be celebrating 50 years of ordained priesthood. The Second Vatican Council began in 1962, the year after my ordination. Anyone living at that time would remember how 'our hearts were burning within us' as we read the documents that came out of that blessed gathering. Among the many riches it is hard to improve on the opening words of the document on the Church in the modern world (1965): "The joys and the hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grief and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts, for theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone."

It was not only within the community of the church that statements like the above stirred a response filled with hope. Many people of many faiths and in all walks of life had a sense that here was a community that would listen to their story and walk with them. The world experienced an outpouring of love towards John XXIII, the Pope who called the Council, and many of us within the church experienced deep gratitude to his successor, Paul VI, who valiantly carried the torch when John XXIII died. So many statements could be recalled. I choose one: words spoken by John XXIII on May 31st 1963, just before receiving the final anointing (he died on June 3rd): 'The secret of my ministry is in that crucifix you see opposite my bed. It's there so that I can see it in my first waking moment and before going to sleep. It's there, also, so that I can talk to it during the long hours of the night. Look at it. See it as I see it. Those open arms have been the program of my pontificate: they say that Christ died for all, for all. No one is excluded from his love, from his forgiveness. What did Christ leave to his Church? He left us 'that all may be one' (John 10:16) ... My time on earth is drawing to a close. But Christ lives on and the Church continues his work. Souls, souls! That they may be one! That they may be one! '

This is the heart that the world longs to feel from the church. A heart open to listen, open to feel, open to respect, open to attract the finest impulses that stir with the breast of every single person on the earth.

What happened to the dream? We all react in different ways, but the people of this world 'that God so loves'(John 3:16) are not responding to the church the way we did 50 years ago. There are many reasons for this, all of them related to the weaknesses of the human condition in which we all share. I do not wish to attempt to name any of them, except one, and I name it because it seems to me the most significant of them all. It is the lack of credibility in the leadership of the church.

There are many levels of leadership. The main leadership in the church is leadership in love – and there is plenty of evidence that love is alive and well. The Australian response to the canonisation of Mary MacKillop witnesses to this. There is leadership in the pursuit of an intelligent grasp of the meaning of human experience. The beatification of Pope John-Paul II is relevant here: his contribution was huge. The leadership that is my concern here is organisational leadership. There is a widespread crisis of credibility in a system of governance that lacks transparency. The forced retirement of Bishop Bill Morris is just the latest in a long list of decisions issuing from the Vatican. I realise that I don't have all the facts so in this, as in most areas in our fast-moving world, I am not in a position to make a proper judgment. Here I am saying only that the feeling I have is not the 'burning in their hearts' that those on the road to Emmaus experienced. I also sense that many within the church share my profound disappointment. Many are voting with their feet, and many who are not part of the community are not impressed. I can hear John XXIII (and many others) weeping.

What is going on? A hundred answers are possible. I will offer questions for reflection.

1. Though the over 2000 bishops present at the Second Vatican Council voted in favour of the documents, not all were pleased. It is easy to rationalise one's behaviour by pointing out the faults in those who inevitably made mistakes in interpreting the documents of the Council, but in the name of defending the truth, were they determined to regain the power

they felt they had lost? I suspect that at the base of their reaction was (and is) their fear of embracing and walking with the world. In their claimed defence of the truth, have some forgotten that THE truth is that God is love? What about the humility and gentleness and attractiveness of the heart of Jesus? Is their success in burrowing deep into the Vatican bureaucracy (and not only there) part of the reason why we find ourselves in such a different place from the years when the Spirit of Jesus breathes so freshly into our post World War II and post-Vatican II world.

2. The Council set up Synods of Bishops to make apparent what is basic to the church's life: the Bishop of Rome is the first among equals. Local bishops are not branch managers of an institution run from the Vatican. Synods were envisioned as an experience of collegiality. However, in fact, it hasn't worked like that. The Bishops met, but the results of their coming together were submitted to the Pope, who, some time later, produced a Papal Exhortation, covering the topic of the synod. While the Apostolic Exhortations may express the insights coming from the synod, the manner in which they are produced does not make this apparent. The organisational power is weighted heavily towards the Vatican.

3. What is going on when National Bishops' Conferences are pulled into line? Without claiming confidence to be able to offer an accurate picture, I can only offer my impressions. I am thinking of the way the back (and the heart) of the Dutch church was broken. I am thinking of the opposition to the way 'Liberation Theology' was being carried out in Central and Southern America. I am thinking of the way the so-called 'Statement of Conclusions' was forced upon the Australian Bishops in 1998. My concern here is with the process. Its lack of transparency (indeed of respect) adds to the prevailing crisis of credibility.

What to do? Of course we must pray – for our world, for ourselves, and for those burdened with the governing of our church. We are all in need of forgiveness and courage. We cannot remain silent. If we don't love the church enough to state our concerns, our love is too shallow. We cannot sit back and allow decisions like the forced resignation of Bishop Bill Morris to go unchallenged.

The tragedy that we are all facing is that the world is not finding the heart of God in the way in which the institution is being governed. So many people, when, like the men journeying to Emmaus, they experience a spiritual awakening, are not hurrying back to share this experience with the community. Many are going away. The Church is the poorer for their leaving, and, such is my faith in the Church, I believe that they, too, are poorer. The Church is called to be the Heart of God in the world.

Nothing in what I have written is meant to be critical of any person. In his encyclical "That they may be one" (1995), a title that echoes the dying words of Pope John XXIII, John-Paul II acknowledged that one of the key hindrances to the communion experienced by Christians is the way in which, at times, Popes have carried out their important role. He speaks of 'painful recollections' and writes: 'I join my predecessor Paul VI in asking forgiveness' (n. 88). He speaks of Peter's need to receive mercy for his denial of Jesus, and speaks of the ministry of the Pope as being 'a ministry of Christ's own mercy'. It must be so in order that 'the exercise of the Petrine ministry may lose nothing of its authenticity and transparency' (n. 93). The word 'transparency' is so important. As he writes in the following paragraph the Pope must not exercise power over people, but is to 'lead them to peaceful pastures' (n. 94). He asked for help (n. 96), and he quoted an acknowledgment he had made

in 1967 when addressing the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Dimitrios I. I give it exactly as it appears in his encyclical: 'I acknowledged my awareness that "for a great variety of reasons, and against the will of all concerned, what should have been a service sometimes manifested itself in a very different light. But ... it is out of desire to obey the will of Christ truly that I recognise that as Bishop of Rome, I am called to exercise that ministry ... I insistently pray the Holy Spirit to shine his light upon us, enlightening all the Pastors and theologians of our Churches, that we may seek – together, of course – the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned"(n. 95).

I have no reason to doubt that his successor, Pope Benedict, would also welcome the contribution of others as to how best to carry out his ministry. In his famous address given at Regensburg in September 2006, Pope Benedict insisted that while religion transcends reason, 'not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature'. Religion, including of course the way in which the papacy is exercised, must be reasonable. In his first encyclical ('On Christian Love') he writes: 'It must be admitted that the Church's leadership was slow to realise that the issue of the just structuring of society needed to be approached in a new way.'(n. 27). We would not want to hear Jesus say as he said of the religious leaders of his day: 'Do what they teach you, and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach'(Matthew 23:3). The world will not listen to the church preaching of just structures if the structures of the church are not transparently just.

We all need constant conversion. The way in which power (much of it relatively modern) exercised by the Vatican is carried out is at the heart of the crisis of credibility experienced by many inside and outside the Church. It matters that we all speak of it, and contribute what we can to be part of the solution. All of us would gain if, once again, we could see the world rejoicing in the Church with the outpouring of joy that was palpably present within living memory.