



The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Revd Justin Welby, celebrated 50 years of peacemaking by the Corrymeela Community at a packed service in St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast yesterday.

The service, which was led by Corrymeela Community leader Pádraig Ó Tuama, included stories from Corrymeela's reconciliation work over the past five decades.

Corrymeela is Northern Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation, as well as a dispersed Christian community. It was formed before the Troubles and continues on in Northern Ireland's changing post-conflict society.

Archbishop Justin was joined at the service by other church leaders, including the Roman Catholic Primate Archbishop Eamon Martin, former Presbyterian Moderator Very Rev Dr Ken Newell, Methodist President Rev Brian Anderson, and President of the Irish Council of Churches Rev Dr Donald Watts.

Roman Catholic Primate Archbishop Eamon Martin led the gathered congregation through the opening liturgy using the three symbols that have guided the Corrymeela community in their first fifty years: an open Bible, a lit candle, and a turf cross.

Archbishop Justin, who has made reconciliation a priority for his ministry, said in his sermon: "Fifty years ago the vision and passion of Ray Davey caught the imagination of a group of young volunteers. Born out of the scars of his wartime experience in Dresden it brought into being a community of faith that has held with great courage and hope the stories, trauma and legacy of forty years of conflict in these islands. "This is an immense gift you now offer to the world and to the church, which in so many places, is faced with unspeakable horror and violence."

He preached on the story of the Woman at the Well and the "concepts it opened up of being a place of welcome or a person of welcome".

"The welcome of reconciliation confronts us with our own differences and our own failures, confronts the Other with the gap between us, and at the same time offers us a way of beginning to narrow that gap and of going forward together," he said.

"This great story of the woman at the well can be interpreted in so many ways and at so many levels. Yet at its heart is the process of change, of the change that comes from a meeting with Jesus Christ.

"There is no substitute for that – and all of us, including Corrymeela, must hold on to that sense that the welcome of reconciliation is not surrendering what we are, but rather encountering definitive truth together in the person of Jesus so that we are changed and enabled to love and see the deep differences which mean that past tensions, conflicts and even murderous outrages can find true reconciliation in the arms and presence of God."

**Archbishop Justin Welby's sermon at the Corrymeela 50th Anniversary Service, St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, 1 November 2015:**

It is a privilege beyond words to share this anniversary weekend. Fifty years ago the vision and passion of Ray Davey caught the imagination of a group of young volunteers.

Born out of the scars of his wartime experience in Dresden, his passion and vision brought into being a community of faith that has held with great courage and hope the stories, trauma and legacy of 40 years of conflict in these islands.

This is an immense gift you now of the Corrymeela Community now offer to the world and to the church, which in so many places, is faced with unspeakable horror and violence.

Where the darkness of which we were just listening to in that beautiful, extraordinarily powerful, deeply convicting piece of liturgy, seems to spread towards us.

Corrymeela has been since its foundation a place of welcome. In our service today, the theme of welcome has been present from the beginning and goes through to the end.

The story of the Woman at the Well opens up different concepts of what it is to be a place of welcome or a person of welcome.

For many of us, welcome means greeting someone whom one knows, with whom one is comfortable – or if uncomfortable who is only going to be there for a short time. We all know that feeling. The New Testament picture of welcome is of gracious hospitality – grace-filled hospitality – to the stranger, to the enemy, and to the one who may become a commitment of love and duty as far as the eye can see.

The story of the woman at the well is an odd one. Samaria was after all for Jesus and for Jews travelling a place of hostility and risk. He really shouldn't have taken that road in the first place. The disciples, clearly deeply concerned for their own safety, had gone off in a group to try and buy food – safer than going off individually – enough of them not to feel threatened. They left their leader, tired by the walk, alone and unprotected.

Those who over the years have seen people with close protection squads will be aware that to abandon your Principle in a place of danger is not generally considered to be a career-enhancing move.

But Jesus does not seem perturbed.

Yet abandon him they do, and so Jesus is left by himself to be challenged, threatened or criticised by whomever comes along. And the first person to come along is a woman, herself an outcast who is evidently separated from her own community by circumstance, by reputation and by the events of her life.

She knows Jesus is a Jew, and thus the Other. Yet this woman in response to the request of this stranger she is prepared to offer him a drink of water – the basic sign of hospitality in the Middle East. She welcomes Jesus by being willing to engage with him.

The meeting has started with the routine welcome of basic and limited hospitality. It is swiftly transformed by Jesus to the welcome of hope and expectation.

And that's a crucial difference.

It is possible to engage in mere hospitality that enables everyone to keep a suitable distance from each other. For example Jesus could have produced some kind of canvas bucket which could be lowered into the well so that it had not been tainted by contact with Samaritans, or a woman. This sort of hospitality is better than nothing, but it is in no sense anything to do with reconciliation.

The welcome of reconciliation confronts us with our own differences and our own failures, and confronts the Other with the gap between us; and at the same time offers us a way of beginning to narrow that gap and of going forward together.

I've been sitting in some internal discomfort listening to these words, and hearing the challenge of Jesus through that liturgy reaching out and saying, 'Are you willing to be uncomfortable for the sake of reconciliation? Or is it just that you want to be seen to do the right thing?' After all, on the whole that's a good thing for an Archbishop.

Let me give you an example, current today. One of my friends is the Anglican Archbishop of Burundi, Bernard Ntahouri. Since the disputed election process that has been going on through most of this year in Burundi, many of the tensions of the terrible civil war that killed five percent of the population and that ended 10 years ago have re-emerged.

Someone else said recently from Burundi, when I was speaking to them over the telephone one evening, "During the day all is normal, but at night they come out and kill."

Bernard himself, as the Anglican Archbishop, was at one point a few weeks ago forced to leave the capital city Bujumbura for his own safety and go north where he could find some security. Thousands, and even tens of thousands, have fled Burundi into neighbouring states, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, itself caught up in a 20 years' civil war. Frying pan to fire.

The issue, as many church leaders have said, including Bernard, is that although there has been peace since 2005, there has been very limited reconciliation.

And there is something – forgive me as an outsider, and I may have this wrong, and if I have, forgive me for presuming to say this. There is perhaps something of this dynamic in the ongoing challenges you face here in Northern Ireland. The moment there is new pressure or new

suspensions, the gaps re-emerge.

Let us hold onto this: Jesus does not permit these gaps.

The welcome of reconciliation is a welcome that draws together antitheses, opposites, even materials that when combined are in danger of being explosive – are deliberately, consciously and expressly brought together by Jesus.

So the welcome of reconciliation is not a soft or an easy option. It is the hard choice that you face, that your leaders face, that we face in different places in different parts of the world, that I face with those who I fear or struggle with. It is the hard choice, which is a necessary part of moving beyond the politics of a peace process.

Yet the welcome of reconciliation is not merely an invitation to confrontation, but far more than that. When you bring together these dangerous materials, that when combined become explosive, the danger of explosion is mitigated and dissolved through the essence of hope that Jesus pours into their combination.

Jesus says to the woman “the water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing out to eternal life.” The woman leaps at this, misunderstanding it at first, but moving from misunderstanding to participation in this hope as the conversation goes on.

In many expositions of this passage, the words of the woman in her discussion with Jesus are seen as trying to evade what he is saying to her by bringing up irrelevant theological points. We’ve heard that sermon before I’m sure – I’ve preached it. I’m ahead of you. [Laughter]

But actually it’s wrong. I was wrong. These were the theological points that had kept the Samaritans and the Jews separate for centuries. Where should we worship? Is Jerusalem, said the Samaritans, the only place? A question expecting the answer, “No.” For if it is, of course, then we Samaritans are almost certain to be dominated by Jewish government. Does that ring a bell?

The location of capitals, even in a dispersed and federated system, is something that sets a pattern of authority, as many in this island know all too well.

So the issues that the woman raises are not mere messing around with theology in order to avoid personal confrontation with Jesus, but the issues that if they are not faced lead to deeper and deeper division – to the alienation and disintegration that when tolerated are the opposite of the purposes and call of Jesus Christ.

Yet Jesus does subvert and challenge her interpretation of these issues. He does not hide from truth-telling. He doesn’t shy away and say “well it’s a bit of this and a bit of that” (my instinct). He tells her that the revelation of God through the people of Israel is a truthful revelation. He establishes truth and stands on it.

But it is done in such a way that there is a welcome into that revelation, and an offering of light and a future through that revelation. We use truth – even true truth – so often to beat people over the head. We can tell the truth in such an aggressive way that it becomes a lie in its very telling.

As we know, the result is that by the end of the story the village turns the perfunctory and cursory welcome of the basic expected hospitality of use of the well, to the genuine engagement of residents for a few days.

The villagers open their homes and their lives to the Other, to Jesus, and are transformed thereby. The subsequent mission to the Samaritans of Philip and others, as yet some years away and separated from this time by the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension and the sending of the Spirit, is put in a proper context of the work and offering of Christ.

For me, the challenge is personally huge. For our society it requires transformation on a scale that is almost unimaginable unless we catch hold of the imagination of God that Ray Davey and the Corrymeela Community have demonstrated to us over the decades.

We need to move beyond the hospitality of welcome to the hospitality of reconciliation. That means a genuine and not merely polite engagement with the Other – and for many of us, such confrontation is awkward. We do not want to be faced with uncomfortable truths even by those who we know love us deeply, let alone by our enemies.

Whether it is within the Anglican Communion, within our politics or elsewhere, hostility is a very painful thing to sit in the middle of.

On Monday last week I sat in the debate in the House of Lords over the issue of tax credits. It was a debate with a genuine atmosphere of anger and hostility, and I find personally such encounters scarring, I like to move away from them. Yet the truths put forward are human truths that needed to be heard.

The welcome of reconciliation is always painful and uncomfortable, and may well leave marks and scars in our lives. The cross of Christ left marks and scars on his body, and yet achieved the ultimate reconciliation of every human being who opens their life to Jesus.

The welcome of reconciliation means in practice encounter and listening, and is best done through communities like Corrymeela, which offer an element of safety in the space. Please, keep going as a community, whatever happens around you. Let the welcome of reconciliation, with all its discomfort, hold you to the path of the Cross.

But there is also a challenge for our society.

In the last week, Poland has elected a government that has turned away from the outsider, a government one of whose spokesperson spoke of refugees as a menace that brings disease.

But do we want to live in a society that retreats into itself, where ‘welcome’ means no more than the polite and limited commitment of stamping a passport and then stamping it again as someone leaves within a few days. That is not the welcome of reconciliation.

Of course, we must be conscious of the strains on our own communities, and pay deep attention to what they say. But the idea, in this world, that in the grace and power of Jesus Christ there is no solution in which we can participate for the demands of common humanity; that there is no opportunity to receive Jesus unexpectedly and find ourselves transformed by the welcome of reconciliation. The idea that in this country we should not participate in such, is collectively absurd.

This great story of the woman at the well can be interpreted in so many ways and at so many levels. Yet at its heart is the process of change, of the change that comes from a meeting with Jesus Christ.

There is no substitute for that – and all of us, including Corrymeela, must hold on to that sense that the welcome of reconciliation is not surrendering what we are, but rather encountering definitive truth together in the person of Jesus so that we are changed and enabled to love and see the deep differences which mean that past tensions, conflicts and even murderous outrages can find true reconciliation in the arms and presence of God.

As disciples of Jesus we are called irrevocably to be part of reconciliation: to make it happen, to bear the burden, and demonstrate the hope that none but he can bring.

12 min read

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**Source URL:** <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/archbishop-preaches-50th-anniversary-corrymeela-community>