

COR Newsletter – 18 March 2009

Dear all,

Last Saturday

I left Bucharest in overcast but clement weather but by the time I hit the Danube I was driving through slush from an overnight snow fall and the temperature had dropped to -0.5 and it had started to snow again! The BBC had forecast sleet for Sofia as well, so not knowing what lay ahead - it is 250 miles to Sofia - I chose safety first and I turned back. When I subsequently got through to Gino of course he was sunning himself with his family in a park (naturally). Ah well, c'est la vie!

Sofia

so in Sofia a service of morning prayer ensued. Gino led the service and Jonathan delivered a talk which I am told was both personal and very poignant. Our catholic organist also brought one of her pupils with her and the congregation was treated to some lovely singing. Well done to all concerned. Jim, I'm sorry to have missed you - I know you can't make the next and last service. God bless you.

and in Bucharest....

an apparition in white miraculously materialised to take a communion service. I eschewed the Ten Commandments and majored on John and Paul's commentary on the significance of the cross. John places the turning over of the tables in the Temple right at the start of Jesus' ministry, rather than at the beginning of his last week which is what we are more used to in the synoptic gospels - so chronologically three years apart!! Don't try and reconcile the two because you can't. Best to accept that creative use of historical material to make theological points is what the gospel writers do. Here right at the start of his gospel, through this story, John is introducing the conflict between the Temple authorities and Jesus and also introducing the cross and resurrection with the cryptic saying "Destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days". Paul, in a deep piece of theology, writes how the cross is the "power of God" which confounds conventional human wisdom and logic. By our way of seeing things if the cross symbolises the power of anything it is rather the power of Rome, to kill who it likes when it like, but Paul uses this collision between divine & human wisdom to demonstrate that God's ways are not our ways, his wisdom is not our wisdom, and the kingdom of God is built on quite different principles to any other kingdom before or since. He deliberately avoids mentioning the resurrection here, which by our reckoning is much more usable to demonstrate God's power - and insists that God is uniquely revealed in the icon of a man, alone, in pain, and hanging dying on a cross - God revealed in vulnerability and powerlessness. Now if that doesn't confound our logic, and leave us speechless in the face of the mystery of God, nothing does.

Next week

22nd March is the fourth week of Lent but also it is **Mothering Sunday**. Appropriate readings are set and I do believe that Lillah will organise some flowers for all the women - not just mums - in church next Sunday.

The electoral roll

My weekly reminder that in church, there are forms to fill in that entitle you to be on the electoral roll of this church. There is just one more Sunday to go before the Annual General meeting which will be held after the morning service on the **29th March**. If anyone wishes to serve on the church council, you must first be on the electoral roll. Nomination forms for the church council can be obtained from me.

Old friends

Well, not that old. **Jonathan and Johanna Soper**, formally of the InterContinental hotel, Bucharest and our church (Johanna is still officially on the church council actually) informed people last week that they are now heading for.....Sharm el Sheik on the Sinai peninsula. Jonathan will be managing the Movenpick resort/hotel there and I should think they are quite excited. A lovely spot by all accounts. *Make mental note: Britannia Ball 2010 - Do Tarom fly from Bucharest to Sharm???*

A little aside..

My brother, who is seven years older than me, used to say that he would rather tell his friends that I was in prison rather than admit I was a priest. But when he heard that I was going to Durham Diocese (He was born in Newcastle) he telephoned me. Now that was the first time my brother has 'phoned me in 54 years so I thought it worth a mention. Mum also tells me that he found the announcement in the Daily Telegraph and has kept it. He must be going soft in his old age.

Some announcements seeing as it is mother's day next Sunday These are genuine (allegedly) church magazine announcements that are quite funny.

* Thursday at 5pm there will be a meeting of the Little Mothers club. All wishing to become Little Mothers, please see the minister in his private study.

* Attention parents: There will be a conference on how to help your teens avoid pre-marital sex. The featured speaker will be Molly Kelly, a nationally known speaker on abstinence and mother of eight.

Thought for the day

There is apparently a Jewish saying that goes, "God couldn't be everywhere, so he invented mothers". And I personally don't know where I would be without the support of my family in my life. At their absolute best, your family, in showing unconditional love to their members can model God's love - so they can become truly sacramental. I have written before that it was from my non-religious family that I learned all about grace - not as an abstract concept but in real life. And when family structures break down (however you define family), the fabric of society suffers as a result. Stable families are I think, demonstrably good for society, especially for the well being of children, so fostering and teaching about the importance of the family is a good thing. That all said, we shouldn't get too precious or restrictive about the family. In recent decades a lot has been made of "Christian family values". Now I know the Bible fairly well, but you will have to excuse me because I can't find much that Jesus himself says or does that provides much firm basis for specifically "Christian" family values. But I *can* find a poignant little story showing him disowning his mother and brothers and proclaiming his *followers* as his "mother and brothers". This certainly doesn't mean that the love of the family was not important to Jesus and is not important to us. I interpret this to mean that the same love that you would expect from mother and father or sister or brother should spill over from the family, breaking through the

boundaries of biological ties and extending that same care, love and affection to others out side of the biological family unit.

Jesus is talking about *extending* the bonds of family not keeping them restricted.

Using everything that we value about the family and extending them to others.

In a specifically "Christian" version of family values, God is the Father of us all, and we as his children are all brothers and sisters. This new society being built on this way of looking at the world is called the church. The sadness is that in so much ordinary church life we don't find this kind of unconditional love, care and warmth at all. The sadness is that church can be just as, if not a whole lot more, dysfunctional than biological families. The wider church family is already split between myriad different denominations - most of whom refuse to eat and drink with each other. Church leaders may be entirely right to denounce the breakdown of the family in society but do they notice or acknowledge just how similarly broken is this new church family that we proclaim - both in international and local terms. In church terms you might say that we are all products of a broken home.

We are also having to come to terms with many different ways of being family in our society nowadays, with everything from single parent families to same sex civil partnerships. But it was ever thus. It does no-one any good to use religion, or more specifically the bible as a weapon with which to beat people over the head with. It is sobering to remember that polygamy was common for the Israelites, Abraham and David were not averse to extra -marital sex, Solomon had hundreds of concubines, and as for the nature of David's relationship with Jonathan.....

A little humility never goes amiss. We didn't invent marriage. Marriage predates Christianity and if Christianity disappeared tomorrow people would still get married. People don't need the church's permission to get married, and they don't *need* our blessing either, but when an explicit involvement of God in a marriage is *sought* this is a truly wonderful thing and a great opportunity for the church. It is here that we have the chance to put our money where our mouth is, so to speak. If we think marriage is wonderful and necessary, (albeit often complicated) for the health of society, we have the opportunity to say so and engage with couples and talk it all through - because no-one else does. I am not naive enough to believe that God is necessarily top of the list of reasons for couples choosing a church wedding, but it certainly leaves the door ajar to talk and inform and get people to think seriously about the words they will be saying and listening to. British people especially tend to be terribly coy about speaking about beliefs. Weddings are a wonderful opportunity to also get them to think about and explore spiritual ideas and even grandiose things like their concept of the universe and their place within it - sometimes possibly for the first time ever in their lives.

The **prayer for today** comes from Vienna Cobb Anderson. She is an Episcopalian priest and as I discovered when I used one of her prayers once before, she was also formally the spiritual director of one of our "old boys" Dennis, late of COR and now working back in Washington DC (Hi Dennis). In this prayer she is talking about a human biological family, or a married couple, but could just as easily be about our local churches, or our national church and its politics. The words are really lovely.

*We are a broken, divided family
of lonely individuals,
each alone;
truly, we are not a family.*

*Communication with each other
seems impossible,
and love vanishes into the void.
Yet both are what we desperately need.
We all need
and want each other,
but we're too proud to admit it,
or to confess
that we're each to blame
for our separation,
loneliness and pain.
We add brick upon brick
to the wall that divides
and isolates us.
You alone are our hope,
O God of our salvation.
Your love breaks down
walls that isolate and divide us
Your love heals, forgives,
and makes us whole again.
Restore us, O God of our salvation.
Reconcile us,
that we may be a family,
and live.
Amen.*

Love and peace

Martin