OTB26 2012 (read only)

“Don’t brood too much” wrote Margaret to her sister Helen, in E.M. Forster’s novel Howards End; “don’t brood too much on the superiority of the unseen to the seen… our business is not to contrast the two but to reconcile them.”

There is a message here for all sincere believers, a message to remain open and hopeful in every situation. Even when faced with sad, distressing, annoying and seemingly intractable problems in our personal lives and in the wider world; there is always a temptation to retreat inwards and try to ignore what is without.

We need at such times to heed Margaret’s advice for we are in the business of reconciling and not contrasting the seen and unseen.

Sadly, what is true of individuals is equally true of groups and faith communities. In the face of a world that seems not to welcome, appreciate or understand and might even be hostile; some choose to turn inwards; set up walls; restate and enforce the definitions of who is with and who is not with them. Like the settlers in America, we circle our wagons and fire out towards the surrounding world. We become defensive and fail to witness to the power of reconciliation, dialogue and understanding.

How different are such attitudes to Moses and Jesus who each remind their followers that God’s grace abounds beyond any limits we may erect for ourselves. “Those who are not against us are for us”; and anyone who contributes towards the healing of the world is working in the name of the Saviour.

So it is sad, for instance, when we hear reports of clergy who withdraw hospitality from relaxation groups who use some of the methods and techniques of Yoga; claiming that per se they contradict the life of grace.

Might it be that when we dismiss the efforts of others to explore the gift of silence, we risk depriving them of a first and tentative step to a life of faith? Becoming a stumbling block for these little ones, when we might offer them the hospitality they deserve.

And when we retreat behind walls that would disparage any path to the truth other than our own are we not shutting our eyes, closing our hands to grace?

When Jesus uses graphic terms to warn against our eyes and limbs leading us into sin, I am reminded of the lines from Isaiah sung in Handel’s Messiah: “Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, then shall the lame man leap like the hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing”. The coming of the Messiah is shown forth by opening our hands in welcome not clenching them in a fist of violence; when we open our eyes to possibilities rather than shutting them in anxious fear; when we speak out in the face of injustice rather than remaining dumb.

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