

Canon John Townroe's Report to the St Boniface Council
Friday, 6th March 2009

Much has happened since our last meeting. St Boniface Lodge: practically every day matters to do with St Boniface Trust have passed through the Lodge, either in the direct business of the Trust or in line with its aims. My own ministry has gone on as usual, open to whatever comes or to whoever comes. The work is given to me in kindly measure, just right for me to cope with as I turn the corner into my 90th year on this earth. I am as ever hugely grateful to this Council for its support which makes all this possible.

This time last year the Lambeth Conference was imminent. I think it is worth recalling how things looked. You will remember that there was much foreboding going on all over the place. Fears that the Conference would be the scene of acrimonious and sterile debate, as it had been on the previous occasion – bad blood, anger and dissension leading quite possibly to a great Anglican Schism: this was how some saw the future. “Break-up” or “Final Break-up”: these were the terms going around, particularly popular amongst journalists. It all served to heighten the sense of an impending drama.

When the time came, the Conference was not like that at all. The worst disasters never happened. By common consent, there was far more mutual respect, far more listening to each other, far more constructive results, than had been expected even by the optimists. By common consent also, this was due above all to Archbishop Rowan and the way he prepared for the Conference, and led it. This was strikingly expressed last month in the General Synod when one of our old students, Christopher Hill, Bishop of Guildford, said that at the Lambeth Conference “the often lonely office and person of the Archbishop of Canterbury uniquely sustained the Anglican Communion.”

We have moved on in the past year, not leaving all the problems behind us, but with fresh hope and vision renewed. Divisions still, but not total fracture. To my mind, the best evidence of this came in Egypt last month at the meeting of the Anglican Primates in Alexandria. Not only did all those who could turn up and attend throughout (including those who boycotted Lambeth), but the atmosphere was (I quote from the communiqué) “honest, deep and transforming.... sharing a strong desire to see our Christian World Communion flourish and remain united”.

“Gracious restraint” was called for, and a new note was struck in these words : “On both sides we need to move from intransigence and the conviction that ‘our’ interpretation is the right one, to a shared waiting upon God”. How different this is from some of the language we were hearing a year ago!

Another thing to recall from a year ago is that at that time hardly anyone foresaw the great economic storm which was about to hit the world. How devastating it has been and continues to be! I remember the economic crises of 1931, after the Wall Street crash; of 1946-47 when Britain and 10 other European countries were bankrupt after the war, until eventually in 1948 they were rescued under the Marshall Plan devised by the American Secretary of State, George Marshall; and of the 1970's when we had to go cap in hand to the International Monetary Fund and beg for help.

It is disputed whether what we have now is worse or no worse than those crises were. What is surely different about the present crisis is that it has struck not just the major industrial nations of the West, but every nation under the sun. All are affected, all are rushing to find solutions, all are starting to realise at last that the answers must be found in working together, or they will not be found at all. This is a vastly important point of difference from anything before in history – our plight is world-wide, inclusive, global.

Could it be that it is in this very point of difference that the *meaning* of it all is to be found? The sense inside the nonsense? The hidden purpose? Is it fanciful to see here that God is seeking to bring the whole human family to its senses, to re-assess its values, and to recognise its inter-dependence and that the word of the Lord is that we must begin to work together as never before for the common, global good, or perish? I do not think it is too fanciful. On the contrary, it seems to me to be in line with the New Testament Letter to the Ephesians (1:9-10) where it says that “God has allowed us to know the secret of his plan” –

namely that “the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into unity in Christ” - mysterious words describing what Scripture calls God’s Mystery, or plan waiting to be disclosed.

In this world-scene of 2009, another startling event has occurred – I mean the agreement in February between China and the United States, represented by Hillary Clinton on a visit to Beijing, that they must cease their enmity and begin to work together, to meet the crisis which has engulfed them both, as well as the rest of us. How amazing, given what went before! How are the mighty fallen! We are all being humbled by events.

Which brings me to something I want particularly to raise this morning. It is about China and the St Boniface heritage. When I came to live in this college in 1948, I found that one part of the building was called “China”. The name-plate is still there on the top floor of the old house, where today young Chinese pupils of Warminster School are living – in fact, many boys and girls from China are in the school. That part of the college was named “China” because of the links between St Boniface Missionary College and the mission-field as China was regarded in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Famously, three Bonifacians were murdered, or martyred, in China – Harry Norman and Charles Robinson during the Boxer rising in 1900, and Frederick Day in 1912. The Chinese silk cassocks of the first two were brought back to England and kept in the college library right into our King’s days, until one was stolen during an overseas holiday letting by the school. The remaining cassock is now kept in the Minster.

To my astonishment, I have found among college papers, a postcard from China post-marked ‘Pekin 6th Feb. 1911’ addressed to the Revd. J G Wippell, St Boniface College, Warminster, Wilts, via Siberia. It says “Dear Tutor, very many thanks for your kind card received today. Reminds me I haven’t yet written my promised letter. I will in a day or two. Just at present I am “topsy turvy”. The plague is getting very close, and tomorrow morning early I start off on a two days’ journey to try and find a doctor to get inoculated. I am advised not to try to get to Peking, so I am cut off from the rest of our Mission. I am going to try and find some London Mission people. I have had over seven weeks here and haven’t seen a fellow-worker or a fellow-countryman the whole time. All’s well. (Signed with initials) J.D.

What a touching reminder this card is of the heroism and missionary zeal of those Old Bonifacians! The question I would like to put to you this morning is : Are we going to allow this link with China to lapse for ever? Or is there some new and appropriate way, suited to the conditions of today, for us to reach out, at least to our hard-pressed fellow Christians in modern China?

I have tried to find out what the conditions really are, and I gather that in Beijing there is a high-profile Roman Catholic church in the centre, used by foreigners and Chinese who regard it as something of a cultural attraction, who go just to watch westerners go to Mass, or as a back-drop for wedding photos. Also in Beijing a few Chinese students who had become regular church-goers when staying in England, seem free to go to church without suffering consequences. It seems also that you can be relatively open and free in discussion, provided you are courteous and respectful. But away from Beijing, it may be a different matter. There are tales of oppression, active persecution and marginalizing – almost certainly, a sense of great isolation from fellow Christians. So I do wonder whether we might, as a start, at least make some enquiries as to conditions and as to ways and means, if this Council is agreed that the St Boniface connection with China should not disappear altogether.

ooOOoo

To sum up this report – it has been a remarkable year. In the thick of a worldwide economic crisis, there have been positive developments in external affairs and in the more hidden realms of people’s lives – or in old-fashioned language, in people’s souls. All in all, I give thanks for some wonderful happenings.