



Reflection to the Sponsoring Body Llanfair Uniting Church, Penrhys. Tuesday, 12 March 2019

'A welcoming place is rich with stories, rituals and a history. It is never simply a physical space but a place alive with commitments and relationships - a space bounded by particular values and meanings.' (Christine D. Pohl : *Hospitality and a way of life in 'Vision'* Spring 2002)

Sunday experience.

We were enjoying time with the young people after service on Sunday. It was the usual - squash and biscuits, tea coffee and chat served up with the sounds of boisterous children. To be fair they had been great through the Sunday school and then our family service. Our exploration in our previous Monday morning Nurture Group continued into our Sunday worship with the familiar, maybe over-familiar parable, known commonly as the Prodigal Son - though Alan T Dale prefers the title *The Brothers Quarrel*. The question that 'Hearing God's Cry' asked was,

'If you put your church as a character in a parable of Jesus, which one would it be and why?'

We were challenged to focusing on a Bible story that reflects Llanfair, '*One which speaks to a challenge your church faces*'. We took the liberty of suggesting a whole parable rather than one character!

On the way into Llanfair earlier I had spoken to three young people sat on Jordan's bench. They were unfamiliar and I thought they were not of Penrhys. That made it all the more important at least to acknowledge them. During our time after worship, the outside door being open, they came with a few more of their friends into the outer lounge area. This is nothing new to Llanfair of course. They wanted to come in for a warm. It was cold outside. To my shame I was initially suspicious, but they sat and chatted among themselves and hopefully felt a welcome warmth.

We had now discussed the parable in our Nurture Group, on Wednesday communion and now at Sunday worship. We had discovered that the parable itself in Luke 15 is one of three parables - *The Lost Sheep* and the *Lost Coin* being the others. We also discovered that Luke places these parables in a context :

'Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' (Luke 15.1-2)

I'm not at all suggesting that these young people should be placed in the shoes of sinners any more than the rest of us. But the parable tells us in between the lines something that is

often overlooked: that the father ran out to greet his son and to give him what we might describe as a 'greta big hug,' and that he did so before he even knew what was in his sons mind. He embraced his son because he loved him not because the son was to tell him that he was sorry that he had sinned and against God and his own father. A more than gentle criticism of the Pharisees' reaction to Jesus sitting down to a meal having invited these so called 'sinners' to dinner. As a response we sang the hymn :

*Let us build a house where hands will reach
Beyond the wood and stone
To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
And live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
Bear the image of God's face;
Let us bring an end to fear and danger:
All are welcome in this place.*

I tell this rather discursive and lengthy story partly because the parable, together with our experiences of the Penrhys, open for us the God we see in Jesus' and the nature of *Kin-dom*. The ways in which we hope Llanfair is reflected in this parable and describes elements of being church will feature in our reports to our April Consultation. I also tell it because we can see something of each of the characters in ourselves and probably in Llanfair. The parable also speakS to us of our constant desire, to be place where we recognise the 'outcast and the stranger' who 'bear the image of God's grace.'

Yesterday (Monday 11th March) we considered the story of Jesus welcome of the children who had been shunned along with their parents by the disciples. One quote from our discussion seems to suggest the same notion,

'Behind the thought (sic. of Jesus) is a sense of solidarity with lowliness and vulnerability and an affirmation that in acts of caring and love we come face to face with the divine.'

Why did we choose this particular parable as reflecting the life Llanfair? Given the clues of the parable, what sort of church do we strive to be? What sort of presence? What offer and challenge does the parable present us? We were reminded in yesterday's story of Jesus, children and humility that,

'Jesus is ... speaking of community which provides mutual caring and support. His brokenness will become their food, the central symbol of divine presence and being – in communion and in community.'

When the young people had left we did question whether or not we might have engaged them more deeply than simply welcoming them. But on reflection we are grateful that they found Llanfair to be a place where they felt welcome. Having *Heard God's Cry* the question will always be how do we respond particularly when people sharing matters of real concern in day to day conversations.

One recent conversation has given us concern. There is no doubt a pressing need for some sort of help with those who have problems of mental health. We know from the media that this is an issue affecting an increasing number in our society. We recognised a real cry from the heart in the way people were explaining their concerns in an issue that affects young people and older people.

'Brother sister let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you.' is a hymn that is close to our hearts. This conversation reminds us of the *'commitments and relationships'* that have been made carefully over a long period of time and that is at the heart of *'Hearing God's Cry'*. That people are willing to be open with their concerns in this way also shows the importance of trust that is built over years of ministry. We recognised the urgency of this. Our response to clear cries for help was to offer to explore possibilities of some form of mental health provision on Penrhys. We are meeting someone skilled in the area this week who we are confident will be able to offer some guidance.

There are many other conversations, sometimes very personal, sometimes involving the community. Such stories as these are indeed *rich* and moving. People fully know that Llanfair is a church - in Christine Pohl's description *'a space bounded by particular values and meanings'*. There is real respect for the faith in which we move, but hopefully they also know that they will not encounter what I might call a forceful, or even manipulative.

Like all churches and ministries there are those occasions when the strength of community is clearly seen. Penrhys has recently lost some people by death who were among the earliest residents - and, as I reflected in my to the January Sponsoring Body - we have welcomed some of the newest residents. Although the word *'moving'* can be over-used, to experience these occasions is to sense that although not everyone worships with us on Sundays, still there is that sense of Llanfair occupying that place in people's lives and at the heart of this community - just we think we remember the churches were to the valleys - *'a welcoming place ... rich with stories, rituals and a history.'*

It is those stories, ancient and modern, and the rituals that we celebrate through the week that remind us of God incarnate in Jesus Christ, and which are the throbbing heart of Llanfair and our small team.

Each time the Nurture Group gather around the **Word** in we are reminded of the stories that form the **word** of the people. These stories and rituals - communion and worship on Sundays and Wednesday, prayers that arise from the community, monthly evening prayer that this month fell on Ash Wednesday - all remind us that all the activity in Llanfair - Homework Club, C.A.F.E, the newly started Youth Meeting, the weekly visits by classes from Penrhys Primary school, visitors from Wales and across the world, and of course the Sponsoring Body, all empower us to be that presence of God in Jesus Christ among God's people,

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There is much for which to be thankful.

Llanfair has never been introspective. In May a group of 8 people, mostly from the Nurture Group are travelling to Madagascar some for two, some for three weeks. They will be visiting Churches, the Offices of the FJKM, (The Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar - a sister Church who have sent volunteers to Penrhys over the years) and meeting with the President of the FJKM. They will also meet up with past volunteers, to renew friendship with them. They will visit Akany Avoko and see their incredible work with young, as well as pay a visit to a local school. They will of course have plenty of time to relax in the city and in the rain forest and to enjoy the rich natural life of Madagascar. We hope that as a result our partnership in the Gospel will be strengthened, maybe some new expression of partnership made, our understanding deepened, and our senses freshened to *Hear God's Cry*.

There is much on which to focus for our Consultation in April. The main area of conversation will of course be considering leadership possibilities on Penrhys after 2020 when Rebecca's term of Partner In Mission through CWM has come to an end and with Miara Hannah and Seren, the family have moved on to the next phase of their lives. As the Sponsoring Body is aware my three year part time ministry in Llanfair will also come to an end in December 2020. We must also need to consider our support for Sharon as a matter of priority.

We pray that as we prepare to consult with a wide range of partners and friends that together we will *Hear God's Cry* and find new ways of responding to the community of Penrhys and to the ministry of Llanfair into the future.

Thank you for all your support. We ask that you will continue to remember all this in your prayers in what is to be an important year for Llanfair and the community of Penrhys.

Note :

Should you wish to have sight of *Hearing God's Cry* and the supporting material from the Council For World Mission, then please let me know and I will send you copies of the documents, or point you to the links on the CWM website.

Peter C Noble
March 2019