

Conversation on the way to Emmaus

WE ARE CALLED to walk on the synodal way in friendship. Otherwise, we shall get nowhere. Friendship, with God and each other, is rooted in the joy of being together but we need words. At Caesarea Philippi, conversation broke down. Jesus had called Peter 'Satan', enemy. On the mountain, he still does not know what to say but they begin to listen to him and so the conversation can begin again as they journey to Jerusalem.

On the way, the disciples quarrel, misunderstand Jesus, and eventually desert him. Silence returns. But the Risen Lord appears and gives them words of healing to speak to each other. We too need healing words that leap cross the boundaries that divide us: the ideological boundaries of left and right; the cultural boundaries that divide one Continent from another, the tensions that sometimes divide men and women. Shared words are the lifeblood of our Church. We need to find them for the sake of our world in which violence is fuelled by humanity's inability to listen. Conversation leads to conversion.

How should conversations begin? In Genesis after the Fall, there is a terrible silence. The silent communion of Eden has become the silence of shame. Adam and Eve hide. How can God reach

across that chasm? God waits patiently until they have clothed themselves to hide their embarrassment. Now they are ready for the first conversation in the Bible. The silence is broken with a simple question: 'Where are you?' It is not a request for information. It is an invitation to step out into the light and stand visibly before the face of God.

Perhaps this is the first question with which we should break the silences that separate us. Not: 'Why do you hold these ridiculous views on liturgy?' Or 'Why are you a heretic or a patriarchal dinosaur?' or 'Why are you deaf to me?' But 'Where are you?' 'What are you worried about?' This is who I am. God invites Adam and Eve to come out of hiding and be seen. If we too step out into the light and let ourselves be seen as we are, we shall find words for each other. In the preparation for this Synod, often it has been the clergy who have been most reluctant to step out into the light and share their worries and doubts. Maybe we are afraid of being seen to be naked. How can we encourage each other not to fear nakedness?

After the Resurrection, the silence of the tomb is again broken with questions. In John's gospel, 'Why are you weeping?' In Luke, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead?' When the disciples flee to Emmaus, they are filled with anger and disappointment. The women claim to have seen the Lord, but they were only

women. As today sometimes, women did not seem to count! The disciples are running away from the community of the Church, like so many people today. Jesus does not block their way or condemn them. He asks 'What are you talking about?' What are the hopes and disappointments that stir in your hearts? The disciples are speaking angrily. The Greek means literally, 'What are these words that you are hurling at each other?' So Jesus invites them to share their anger. They had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel, but they were wrong. He failed. So, he walks with them and opens himself to their anger and fear. Our world is filled with anger. We speak of the politics of anger. A recent book is called *American Rage*. This anger infects our Church too. A justified anger at the sexual abuse of children. Anger at the position of women in the Church. Anger at those awful conservatives or horrible liberals. Do we, like Jesus, dare to ask each other: 'What are you talking about? Why are you angry?' Do we dare to hear the reply? Sometimes I become fed up with listening to all this anger. I cannot bear to hear any more. But listen I must, as Jesus does, walking to Emmaus.

Many people hope that in this Synod their voice will be heard. They feel ignored and voiceless. They are right. But we will only have a voice if we first listen. God calls to people by name.

Abraham, Abraham; Moses, Samuel. They reply with the beautiful Hebrew word *Hinni*, 'Here I am'.

The foundation of our existence is that God addresses each of us by name, and we hear. Not the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am' but I hear therefore I am. We are here to listen to the Lord, and to each other. As they say, we have two ears but only one mouth! Only after listening comes speech.

We listen not just to what people are saying but what they are trying to say. We listen for the unspoken words, the words for which they search. There is a Sicilian saying:

'La miglior parola è quella che non si dice' [1] 'The best word is the one that is not spoken'.

We listen for how they are right, for their grain of truth, even if what they say is wrong. We listen with hope and not contempt. We had one rule on the General Council of the Dominican Order. What the brethren said was never nonsense. It may be misinformed, illogical, indeed wrong. But somewhere in their mistaken words is a truth I need to hear. We are mendicants after the truth. The earliest brethren said of St Dominic that

'he understood everything in the humility of his intelligence.' [2]

Perhaps Religious Orders have something to teach the Church about the art of conversation. St Benedict teaches us to seek consensus; St Dominic to love debate, St Catherine of Siena to delight

in conversation, and St Ignatius of Loyola, the art of discernment. St Philip Neri, the role of laughter.

If we really listen, our ready-made answers will evaporate. We will be silenced and lost for words, as Zechariah was before he burst into song. If I do not know how to respond to my sister or brother's pain or puzzlement, I must turn to the Lord and ask for words. Then the conversation can begin.

Conversation needs an imaginative leap into the experience of the other person. To see with their eyes, and hear with their ears. We need to get inside their skin. From what experiences do their words spring? What pain or hope do they carry? What journey are they on?

There was a heated debate on preaching in a Dominican General Chapter over the nature of preaching, always a hot topic for Dominicans! The document proposed to the Chapter understood preaching as in dialogical: we proclaim our faith by entering into conversation. But some capitulars strongly disagreed, arguing this verged on relativism. They said 'We must dare to preach the truth boldly'. Slowly it became evident that the quarrelling brethren were speaking out of vastly different experiences.

The document had been written by a brother based in Pakistan, where Christianity necessarily finds itself in constant dialogue with Islam. In Asia, there is no preaching without

dialogue. The brethren who reacted strongly against the document were mainly from the former Soviet Union. For them, the idea of dialogue with those who had imprisoned them made no sense.

To get beyond the disagreement, rational argument was necessary but not enough. You had to imagine why the other person held his or her view. What experience led them to this view? What wounds do they bear? What is their joy?

This demanded listening with all of one's imagination. Love is always the triumph of the imagination, as hatred is a failure of the imagination. Hatred is abstract. Love is particular. In Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*, the hero, a poor weak priest, says:

'When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination.'

We need to leap across the boundaries not just of left and right, or cultural boundaries, but generational boundaries too. I have the privilege of living with young Dominicans whose journey of faith is different from mine. Many religious and priests of my generation grew up in strongly Catholic families. The faith deeply penetrated our everyday lives. The adventure of the Second Vatican Council was in reaching out to the secular world. French priests went to work in factories. We took off the habit and immersed ourselves in

the world. One angry sister, seeing me wearing my habit, exploded: 'Why are you still wearing that old thing?'

Today many young people – especially in the West, but increasingly everywhere – grow up in a secular world, agnostic or even atheistic. Their adventure is the discovery of the gospel, the Church and the tradition. They joyfully put on the habit. Our journeys are contrary but not contradictory. Like Jesus, I must walk with them, and learn what excites their hearts. 'What are you talking about?' What films do you watch? What music do you love? Then we shall be given words for each other.

I must imagine how they see me! Who am I in their gaze? Once I was cycling around Saigon with a crowd of young Vietnamese Dominican students. This was long before tourists became common. We went around the corner and there were a group of western tourists. They looked so big and fat and a strange ugly colour. What odd people. Then I realised that was what I looked like too!

As the disciples walk to Emmaus, they listen to this stranger who calls them fools and contradicts them. He is angry too! But they begin to delight in his words. Their hearts burn within them. During the Synod can we learn the ecstatic pleasure of disagreement leading to insight? Hugo Rahner, Karl's younger brother (and much easier to understand!), wrote a book on

homo ludens, playful humanity.[3] Let us learn to speak to each other playfully! As Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well do in John 4.

In today's first reading, we hear that in the fullness of time,

'The city shall be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets.' (Zechariah 8.5)

The gospel invites us all to become children:

'Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 18.3).

We prepare for the Kingdom by becoming playful, childlike but not childish. Sometimes we in the Church are afflicted by a dull, joyless seriousness. No wonder people are bored!

On the night of the new millennium, while I was waiting in Cote d'Ivoire to catch a flight to Angola, I sat in the dark with our Dominican students, sharing a beer and talking easily about what was dearest to us. We delighted in the pleasure of being different, of having different imaginations. The delight in difference! I feared I would miss the plane, but it was three days late! Difference is fertile, generative. Each of us is the fruit of the wonderful difference between men and women. If we flee from difference, we shall be barren and childless, in our homes and our Church. Again, we thank all the parents in this Synod! Families can teach the Church a lot about how to cope with difference. Parents learn how to reach out to children who

make incomprehensible choices and yet know they still have a home.

If we can discover the pleasure of imagining why our sisters and brothers hold the views we find odd, then a new springtime will begin in the Church. The Holy Spirit will give us the gift of speaking other languages.

Notice that Jesus does not attempt to control the conversation. He asks what they are talking about; he goes where they go, not where he wishes to go; he accepts their hospitality. A real conversation cannot be controlled. One surrenders oneself to its direction. We cannot anticipate where it will take us, to Emmaus or Jerusalem. Where will this Synod lead the Church? If we knew in advance, there would be no point in having it! Let us be surprised!

True conversation is therefore risky. If we open ourselves to others in free conversation we shall be changed. Each profound friendship brings into existence a dimension of my life and identity that has never existed before. I become someone I have never quite been before. I grew up in a wonderful conservative Catholic family. When I became a Dominican I became friends with people of a different background, utterly different politics, which my family found disturbing! Who then was I when I went home to stay with my family? How did I reconcile the person who I was with them and the person that I was becoming with the Dominicans?

Every year I get to know newly joined Dominicans with different convictions and different ways of seeing the world. If I open myself to them in friendship, who will I become? Even at my advanced age, my identity must remain open. In Madeleine Thien's novel about Chinese immigrants in the USA, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, one of the characters says,

'Don't ever try to be only a single thing, an unbroken human being. If so many people love you, can you honestly be one thing?' [4]

If we open ourselves to multiple friendships, we shall not have a neat, tightly defined identity. If we open ourselves to each other in this Synod, we shall all be changed. It will be a little death and resurrection.

A Filipino Dominican Novice Master had a notice on his door:

"Forgive me. I am a work in progress."

Coherence lies ahead, in the Kingdom. Then the wolf and the lamb within each of us shall be at peace with each other. If we have closed, fixed identities written in stone now, we shall never know the adventure of new friendships which will unfold new dimensions of who we are. We shall not be open to the spacious friendship of the Lord.

When they reach Emmaus, the flight from Jerusalem stops. Jesus looks as if he wishes to go further but, with glorious irony they invite the Lord of the Sabbath to rest with them.

‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over.’ (Luke 24:29).

Jesus accepts their hospitality as the three strangers in Genesis 18 accepted the hospitality of Abraham. God is our guest. We too must have the humility to be guests. The German submission said that we must leave ‘the comfortable position of those who give hospitality to allow ourselves to be welcomed into the existence of those who are our companions on the journey of humanity’.

Marie-Dominique Chenu OP, the grandfather of the Second Vatican Council, went out most evenings, even when he was eighty. He went out to listen to trade union leaders, academics, artists, families, and accept their hospitality. In the evening we would meet for a beer and he would ask,

‘What did you learn today? At whose table did you sit? What gifts did you receive?’

The Church in every Continent has gifts for the universal Church. To take just one example, my brethren in Latin America taught me to open my ears to the words of the poor, especially our beloved brother Gustavo Gutiérrez. Shall we hear them in our debates this month? What shall we learn from our brothers and sisters in Asia and Africa?

‘When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him and he vanished from their sight.’ (Luke 24:29).

Their eyes were opened. The previous time that we heard that phrase was when Adam and Eve took the fruit from the Tree of Life, and their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked. This is why some ancient commentators saw the disciples as Cleopas and his wife, a married couple, a new Adam and Eve. Now they eat the bread of life.

One last small thought: When Jesus vanishes from their sight they say,

‘Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked to us on the road.’ (Luke 24:32)

It is as if it is only afterwards that they become aware of the joy they had as they walked with the Lord. St John Henry Newman said that it is only as we look backwards at our lives that we become aware of how God was always with us. I pray that this will be our experience too.

During this Synod, we shall be like these disciples. Sometimes we shall not be aware of the Lord’s grace working in us and may even think that it is all a waste of time. But I pray God that afterwards, looking backwards, we shall become aware that God was with us all the time, and that our hearts burnt within us.

[1] “La meglio parola è chiddra chi nun si dici”

[2] ‘humili cordis intelligentia’[2]

[3] *Man at Play or Did you ever practice eutrapelia?* Translated by Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn, Compass Books, London, 1965

[4] *Granta*, London, 2016, p. 457