

The Kebab

We do not live for ourselves only

I recently heard a beautiful story from a young Iranian man, forced to flee Iran, and now an asylum seeker, living day to day, an uncertain future in Australia. His own story is deeply sad and disturbing, but this is the story he tells:

The southern part of Iran is a place which has great poverty and also struggles to find teachers willing to teach at the schools there. While he was a university student Hamid decided that he would go south as often as he could and help out, teaching the children in one of the schools. He soon became aware that the children were hungry. And as is the case when children are hungry they could not concentrate or learn. So Hamid drew on his contacts and managed to organise food for the children in this particular school, each child being given a bowl of rice and two kebabs. The first day the children were given the rice and kebabs he noticed a commotion in the playground and saw teachers shouting at a little boy. When he walked over to see what was happening he found one of the boys had eaten only one of his kebabs and put the other into his pocket. The teacher was adamant that he should eat it at once and the little boy was just as adamantly refusing to take it out of his pocket. Hamid spoke to the boy who told him that his little sister at home had never had a kebab before and he was taking it home for her. There was no way he was going to relinquish the treasure in his pocket!

In its beauty I found this a deeply moving story and a story of profound wisdom. Today this little boy is our teacher! He knew physical hunger and I am sure in that situation of poverty and need that hunger would have been great. But he was also able to look beyond his personal hunger and see himself in relationship. This good thing, this kebab, was not just for him alone! He remembered the hunger of his little sister. One hungry child remembering the hunger of another. And that drove him to put the kebab in his pocket to take it home to her and to stand up to those who got angry with him and told him to eat it and not to take it away with him. We can just imagine his excitement as he raced home at the end of the day with the kebab in his pocket, perhaps rather dried out and squishy by then, and in a gesture of love and triumph gave it to her. Love indeed! The poor can truly be our teachers. And if we take seriously the declaration of John in his Second Letter that “God is love and everyone who lives in love lives in God and God lives in them”, then this little boy surely shows us something of the face of God. His story reminds us of something at the heart of our Christian Tradition - we do not live for ourselves only.

We live in community. We share life with others at a particular time and in a particular place. Today increasingly, through technological advances, we live in a worldwide community in a very real sense. The joys and sorrows of each person, wherever they may be, are our joys and

sorrows too, if only in the sense that communication brings them to our attention. What we do with that information of course is the heart of the matter. Information about issues such as poverty, natural and other disasters and the many areas of human need, coupled with the immediacy of this information, make it possible to respond to these issues in ways previously unimagined. And the exciting thing is that the individual, from his or her own home, is able to launch initiatives and appeals that change minds, begin worldwide movements, alter perspectives and provide material aid that brings relief in situations of crisis. In such a world we are called to understand ever more urgently what living in community really means and what it asks of us.

The global nature of contemporary community, however, exists alongside another contemporary feature - individualism. Originally humans lived and survived in tribal communities and in such communities the needs and well-being of the tribe, the community, took precedence. In fact individualism was an unknown concept. The common good was what ensured the survival of the group. *Tribal* identity was what mattered. Working together and the good of the community were not ethical guidelines that had to be consciously chosen and worked at. That was simply the way it worked. In the last few centuries, in the post-Enlightenment western world - and increasingly now in other cultures too - the individual has taken precedence. Individual rights and needs, desires and well-being, dreams and aspirations and personal fulfilment, have replaced group identity as the primary form of identity. Of course group identity still exists in so many ways, such as national identity, religious identity, family identity, coherence of values, and the myriad ways we belong and are part of various movements and cultures, but perhaps the difference may best be expressed in terms of personal choice. Rather than being born into a pre-determined role and path through life, we make choices about what we will commit to. We make choices based on our worldview, on the values we hold dear and that we draw upon as we make our daily and big life decisions. And those choices we make are all part of the journey into personal fulfilment and growth, the realization of our potential and happiness.

Individualism at its best proclaims the sacredness of the individual, each person made in the image of God, embodying Divine life and imaging Divine creativity. As we go through life we are called to make choices that will bring this sacred potential to fruition. Today we are living a paradox. Tribal or group consciousness is no longer primary to our identity, yet at the same time we are learning day by day that our own flourishing and indeed our own survival increasingly depend on the survival of our world community. And, as the environmental crisis so powerfully brings home to us, this community extends beyond the human community. This interplay of individual growth or flourishing and our interconnectedness is in fact nothing new for it is at the heart of Christian life. It extends back even further to Judaism, to our Jewish roots, which saw the beginning of ethical monotheism. We do not live for ourselves alone. As

the prophet Micah so powerfully put it, what God requires is that we act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God. God and others - love of God and love of others are entwined. Our dedication to God is inherently linked to our dedication to the well-being of others. Centuries ago Catherine of Siena spoke of this as the two feet of Love. And we must walk on both those feet. When we look at Jesus' invitation to people to follow him we see him call them, give them an invitation to a new way of living, to follow his Way, to change and grow. But that was not all. At the same time, they were sent out to teach, to preach, to heal. The relationship with Jesus that they were called into was to bear fruit in lives lived not for themselves alone. The healing, teaching and preaching they were sent out to do were to create communities where all were accepted and included and where people were restored to their rightful place and given the opportunity to live life to the full.

"In any time social responsibility is the keystone of the Christian life", wrote Thomas Merton. Why? Because Christians are called to live lives transformed in the charity of Christ. And this charity or love is a self-sacrificing love. To love means to no longer live for ourselves alone. It is to will the good of the other and to do all in our power to bring this about. This really asks something of us, just as it did for that little Iranian boy, looking beyond his own hunger to the well-being and indeed the joy of his sister.

There is a core African value known as *ubuntu*. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, one of several powerful voices speaking out against the evils of apartheid in South Africa in the last century, describes *ubuntu* in this way: "what it means to be truly human, it refers to gentleness, to compassion, to hospitality, to openness to others, to vulnerability, to be available for others and to know that you are bound up with them in the bundle of life, for a person is only a person through others". This value inspired and led the reformers of South Africa in those dark days. It is what drove them to offer themselves wholeheartedly to the struggle to bring about change so that all could live with the dignity of humanity in a society where life in its fullness was the norm for everyone and not just a few. This is the Christian understanding of love, to will the good of another, and it requires empathy and compassion. Empathy is the ability to understand what another is experiencing from within that person's own frame of reference, or to put oneself in another's shoes. Compassion, to suffer with, to go through something with another, is what gives rise to the desire to relieve suffering. A mature moral conscience is grounded in this love. We are called to make moral decisions with a conscience that judges in terms of love.

Archbishop Denis Hurley, another powerful voice in the apartheid days, said that the first step is to come to know others, especially those that we have decided are different from us. This means crossing cultural boundaries, seeing others not as a threat but as people just like ourselves and making contacts that will move us from the abstract principle of human dignity to

the lived experience of Christian love. Hurley used to quote one of his favourite theologians, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who said, "Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfil them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves. It is love that is the supreme test of the Christian spirit". Beyers Naude was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, the church that supported apartheid, but he came to the realization that he could no longer uphold this systematic destruction of human dignity, and he left his ministry. In 1962 in a sermon to his stunned congregation he said, "all people are called to love one another ... the outcome of this love is that I should allow other people to have the same rights and opportunities as my group demands". This is an ordinary Christian principle but at that time and in that context in a church which had played a significant role in the architecture of apartheid and had designed a theology to support it, it was radical and disconcerting for them. Naude shows us just what it takes to walk on the two feet of Love. Any arrangement which insists that we find our identity in dissociation with others, in distinction, is simply not coherent with Christian life. Hurley at that time challenged White South Africans to "expand the areas of love, to push their frontiers ever outwards in an adventure, agonizing to old prejudices, but more than amply rewarding through the response to be found in that treasure of warm humanity waiting on the other side of the barrier White South Africans have so feared to cross".

Love is not a feeling. It does not wish others well from a distance but gets involved, rolls up its sleeves and is committed in a very real sense. When Desmond Tutu became archbishop of Cape town in September 1986, he said that Christian love looks for the God hidden in human flesh: "If we take the incarnation seriously", he said, "we must be concerned about where people live, how they live, whether they have justice, whether they are uprooted and dumped as rubbish in resettlement camps, whether they are detained without trial, whether they have a say in the decisions that affect their lives most deeply". Although he was speaking about the atrocities of apartheid South Africa his words could well be spoken to us today as we witness the atrocities of racial hatred, the hatred directed at people on the grounds of their sexuality, the disturbing sadness of internally displaced people, refugees, asylum seekers, those taking to the seas in desperation, the legacy of the atrocities committed in the name of colonization and missionization and the sufferings of Indigenous peoples. Jesus spoke of love as laying down one's life for one's friends. There is no greater love than this, he said. He also said that those who lose their life for His sake, in other words, in the pursuit of this love, will find it. This may seem threatening and uninviting in our individualistic world, but it is in fact the way into the deepest reality of our individual identity. We are made for togetherness. "We are human because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence", declared Tutu. "We are sisters and brothers of one another whether we like it or not, and each one of us is a precious individual".

Today still, some of the old tribalism still exists and is played out in cruel and destructive ways. Ethnic cleansing has been the scourge of the twentieth century and continues. But today too we are experiencing a new kind of 'tribalism'. It is global and it unites people across many other divides. This is a destructive and hate-inspired tribalism. It offers identity and commonality in discrimination and anger. But above all it unites people in fear. It is played out most powerfully today in racism, in the area of sexuality and gay marriage, in the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers and currently in our own country in the 'Reclaim Australia' movement. In the coherence of values and attitudes which mark those who identify with such groups there is unity, a global community, bonding, loyalty and commitment to actively influencing the course of events. But it thrives on divisiveness, on undermining the other. It is self-focused in its attempt to preserve the fear-inspired values it upholds. And as a result, ultimately it denies life.

In the face of this we are called to keep before us the invitation of Jesus to offer ourselves and our lives for the good of all. Decades ago, Beyers Naude, as he left his church community and aligned his work with that of another community committed to walking on the two feet of Love, implored those sitting in the pews: "O my church, I call today with all the earnestness that is in me: awake before it is too late, stand up and stretch out the hand of Christian brotherhood to all who reach out to you in sincerity. There is still time, but time is becoming very short".

This year we mark 142 years since the arrival of Mother Gonzaga Barry and her companions on the *Somersetshire*, and the beginning of the Loreto foundations in Australia. Gonzaga Barry was a visionary woman of great courage and wisdom. 'Outreach' was always part of her plan and in her 1889 edition of *Eucalyptus Blossoms* we find her exhorting her students to this kind of committed and engaged love that cuts across the divides of society, realizes our human potential for love and creates the world Jesus envisioned:

"I want you now to turn your attention to the hundreds of poor, little neglected children in the large cities and towns of Australia whose fate is more to be deplored than that of the little victims of 'famine fever' referring to the potato famine in Ireland. I read the other day that within the last eight years, six hundred destitute children have been provided for by a society in Melbourne, not a Catholic one, and this chiefly through the instrumentality of one lady. Now if all our girls would 'lend a hand' and do a little to strengthen the hands of those who are trying to do all they can for the unfortunate children, we would see wonderful results. I heard also of a society formed of rich children; it has thousands of members in England, and as all these try and help less fortunate children, the amount of good done is very great, not only for the poor, but also to the rich who are taught from their earliest years to compassionate sufferings, to be kind and charitable and to live not for themselves only. Perhaps our Loreto children could form a similar association with the help of their parents. Think and pray about it my dear children".

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