

# CREATION COMMUNITY AND OUR INHERITANCE

by *Miranda Harris* - Acts 17:16-34, Psalm 133

“Belonging is a terrible but beautiful reality,” wrote Jean Vanier. “We do not discover who we are, we do not reach true humanness in a solitary state, we discover it through mutual dependency, in weakness, in learning through belonging.”<sup>i</sup> This is made very difficult for us in a culture which places great emphasis on self-sufficiency and independence, actively discouraging the model of personal and economic interdependence we find in the Bible. We are used to privatizing our experience of life, and then placing ownership upon it; my family, my job, my money, my faith. Nowhere is this tendency more dangerous than in the community of believers, where it isolates people from one another and effectively denies the gospel its power to transform relationships and become visible in a world badly in need of some good news.

In the ecstasy and ignorance of my own conversion experience, and with the sublime confidence of one setting out into an entirely black and white world, I assumed that my wordy proclamations to friends and family (and sometimes people on trains) were introducing God for the very first time. A completely fresh set of footprints, as it were. I was to learn a lot about God’s presence and my own pride in the experience of helping to run the first A Rocha Centre for ten years, and began to detect his footprints and fingerprints everywhere: A whiff of the fragrance of Jesus lurking around someone who has not given his life to Christ? A tender heart showing evident forgiveness while clearly not yet having received forgiveness from the Lord herself? Yet increasingly I became aware of a secret history unfolding in every life in which God, acknowledged or not, is the protagonist. Sometimes, the very people protesting the loudest spend the most time thinking about him. Eugene Peterson, writing to a friend who after a lifetime of struggle finally begins to take hold of faith in Christ, says:

*For both of us God has held the centre of our awareness and action. The contrast between your shaking your fist at Him and my shaking hands with Him may not be as significant as that it is God who has dominated both our lives ... in your unbelieving (you) have probably thought about God more than I have in my believing.*<sup>ii</sup>

We should not, of course, be surprised. Paul makes it shockingly plain in Acts 17 that before we belong to the (wonderful and terrible) community of the redeemed in Christ, we belong, even more fundamentally, along with every other man, woman and child, to the community of the created. ‘For we are God’s offspring,’ says Paul. He

is referring to all people, including the Greeks and Romans, Jews and Gentiles assembled for the meeting of the Areopagus in Athens, not just to followers of ‘The Way.’ I started to realize how often I behaved as if this were not the case, treating unbelievers as if they had nothing to offer and everything to receive, nothing to teach and everything to learn - and not at all with the respect and reverence due to someone fearfully, wonderfully and uniquely made by God. I began to pray differently: ‘Lord, what are you doing in N’s life? Can I be alongside in some way? Share the journey for a time ...?’ There is a sort of holiness to being in the presence of another. Any other. Just as there is in standing in creation and really noticing God’s handiwork, lingering on details of colour and form, feeling the wind, smelling the earth and sea, hearing the bird and insect symphony, sad maybe that some of the instruments are already missing. The question is surely not ‘how can I introduce Jesus?’ but ‘what is Jesus up to?’ Eugene Peterson again, commenting on Mark 16: 6 and 7 writes:

*In every visit, every meeting I attend, every appointment I keep, I have been anticipated. The risen Christ got there ahead of me ... is in that room already. What is he doing? What is he saying? What is going on?*<sup>iii</sup>

The problem is that, as Christians, we don’t have a disembodied message to pass on - just as God didn’t send an angel with a scroll; he sent his own son. And now he sends us (John 20:21) - not the gospel as a box of chocolates, bunch of flowers, or even a cheque for a million pounds, but rather a message to live. In fact, we are the message, as Paul explained to the Corinthian Church: “you yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody.” (1 Cor.3:2). D.L Moody agreed with him, claiming that in any group of 100 people only one will be reading the Bible, while 99 read the Christians. Unfortunately, as someone else pointed out, what we are speaks so loudly that people often can’t hear a word we say! And yet the good news is that, because of God’s indwelling Spirit, a process of transformation is taking place within the people of God so that what we truly are on the inside is becoming more and more Christ-like.

In our eagerness to pass on the gospel we are inclined to forget how desperately we need to be receiving it ourselves. Followers of Jesus need forgiveness and filling with God’s Spirit every bit as much as seekers after the truth. Remarkably, God has chosen to reveal what he is like not only through his prophets, his Son, and his word, but also through his body, the Church. Many people in Western

# CREATION COMMUNITY AND OUR INHERITANCE

Europe at the beginning of the third millennium are familiar with what the gospel says, but what does it look like? Feel like? Mean? What we really believe is revealed far more accurately through who we are than through what we say. It is etched in the quality of relationships formed, often painfully, within the pressures of frantic, busy lives. This is both the paradox and the power of Christian community.

So should we all leave our current situations and set up intentional Christian communities, so the world can see more clearly what God is like? According to Acts 17, we are already set in specific communities by God himself (v.26); we do not need to create communities; rather, we need to identify and describe those we already belong to. This concept is not so much absent as in need of refining. Generally it is assumed that community means people of like mind, or at any rate compatible values, choosing to live together. However, as we discovered during the early years of A Rocha's life in Portugal, genuine community can be created with people of similar, different, or indeed no particular beliefs. It begins with inclusion, it involves love, acceptance and forgiveness, and it depends on a commitment to transparent relationships and self-giving hospitality, to a shared life of which the centerpiece is more often the kitchen table than the meeting room. Unconditional welcome is God's undeserved gift to us. We are not at liberty to introduce a different set of rules for those who arrive on our doorstep.

Herein lies the difference between evangelism and propaganda. Christian community is a risky undertaking. People are presented with the unedited version of our lives. All of us are works of art in progress, pots on the wheel, and, as with any artistic enterprise, one often seems to go backwards not forwards, creating more mess instead of the longed-for order. We are not predictable in our behaviour, especially in our goodness. "Man is not an arithmetical expression," wrote Dostoyevsky, "he is a mysterious and puzzling being, and his nature is extreme and contradictory all through."<sup>iv</sup> C.S. Lewis, peering inside himself and finding there "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears [and] a harem of fondled hatreds,"<sup>v</sup> appears to reach an even more disturbing conclusion about the human condition. If such is the state of one person, what possible hope is there for realizing the psalmist's vision of harmony and blessing in Psalm 133, when several of these unpromising creatures are trying to live together?

The key to loving others and living peacefully together is surely to begin to take hold of how much we ourselves are already loved. Henri Nouwen, who struggled all his life to really experience this love for himself, nevertheless understood it well. He wrote: "Long before your parents admired you or your friends acknowledged your gifts or your teacher, colleagues and employer encouraged you, you were already 'chosen'. The eyes of love had seen you as precious, as of infinite beauty, as of eternal value."<sup>vi</sup> This is a voice that has fallen silent, or perhaps never spoken, in too many peoples' lives. When we understand that we are loved, and of unique significance and value, we become free to bow out of the ruthlessly competitive and comparative culture to which we belong, and offer the same forgiveness and acceptance to others that we have received.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, in a recent address to the General Synod of the Church of England said: "God makes a difference of such a kind that a community appears, bound to and in his Son by the Spirit's power." The Apostle Peter's first letter to the scattered Christians instructs them to give hospitality to one another, and to use the gifts they have been given for the common good, but above all to "love each other deeply" Why? "Because love covers over a multitude of sins." There is a great deal to prayerfully reflect on in these passages that speak to us of the reality of God's presence in his people. In surprising and visible ways, he can bring life to the world when we allow our relationships with him, each other and creation itself to be transformed.

- i. *Jean Vanier: Becoming Human*
- ii. *Eugene Peterson: The Wisdom of Each Other*
- iii. *Eugene Peterson: Under the Unpredictable Plant*
- iv. *Quoted by Nicholas Berdyaev in Dostoyevsky*
- v. *C.S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy*
- vi. *Henri Nouwen: Life of the Beloved*

