

Being Evangelised by the Young

Damian Cassidy O.Carm

Youth Sunday, 23rd November, is an opportunity to celebrate and encourage the participation of young people in the Church. Damian Cassidy O.Carm reflects on his ministry to young adults and describes how his own faith has been enriched by the gifts they bring to the Church.

I am fascinated by the story of people. Gazing out into the Church during the liturgy I am aware of the many stories of the members of the congregation. Some are in the first stages of grief, others of illness, still others have fallen in love and are caught up in all the excitement that those first steps of a relationship bring. Others are lonely and the parish is the place where their hunger for companionship is fed. All too often we don't know what is happening in people's lives until we are invited into the story, by both its telling and our becoming involved.

One of the joys of ministry is being told those stories. People ask for a chat and suddenly the story of their lives comes tumbling out, told often for the first time. It is in the context of the story of our lives that we become evangelised. Jesus knew the value of stories and wove wonderful images of God's love and kindness into his teaching. The story of our life is our reality and this is where Christ will meet us.

Beginning my story

I am the youngest of a family of four children, brought up in a loving and faith-filled home. We wanted for little, although we were by no means wealthy in real terms. The richness of my family was the love and faith we shared.

As a child I can remember my father teaching me that life is for the living and that nothing should stand in the way of dreams becoming realised. Good words for a young person to hear; they were affirming, encouraging and a challenge to be the best that you can be – a wonderful legacy for a parent to pass on to



their child. The greatest gift I received from my parents was faith. They have both shared with me the faith that makes them whole and wholly loving. Loving into life is the task of the Christian and countless times I have been loved into life by the young people of our Church.

Memory

The strongest memory of faith becoming something that I claimed for myself was during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Britain in 1982. I was fifteen and together with a group from my parish I travelled to Ninian Park in Cardiff for his meeting with young people. If I am honest I don't remember the words that were said or anything of the liturgy. What I do remember is the energy and enthusiasm of my generation at prayer. It changed me and it changed my faith; from that moment on I chose to be part of the Church. I felt called. That call to faith came from my peers, and as I matured in faith, it has been constantly upheld and challenged by the young people I find myself with.

This participation in the Church has led me in many and various ways, from a career as a nurse into religious life and the ordained ministry. Throughout this time I have found myself among the young, and in many ways it has kept me young. It has been both joy and challenge, fruitful and mystifying. I have served in retreat ministry and university chaplaincy. I now find myself working in a densely populated parish and on a team of six priests on a diocesan youth team. I am amazed at the faith I witness among our young people, their generosity and concern for our world touches me deeply. The Church is being renewed as our young Church asks of us: how have

we lived the gospel and what kind of faith community are we passing on to them? The reality of working with young people is that they ask urgent questions that demand answers; this requires some applied theology and a deep sense of honesty.

Contextualising evangelisation

St Francis of Assisi instructed his brothers to ‘preach the gospel and if necessary use the words.’ Theology is often a question of who we are and what we do. Books don’t define us, but in a real way action does. I can think of countless ways in which God is made incarnate in very real situations. As a young nurse working in an Accident and Emergency department I remember being in the midst of the pain of people’s lives, and together with other young men and women, trying to resolve that mess. I realised then that faith involves the whole person and we cannot compartmentalise faith from everyday life. I have very strong memories of that time. One September morning everything was chaos, much more so than usual, and a young boy was brought to us. He had been in a road accident and his body was broken in such a devastating way. One of my colleagues said to me, “OK Damian, you believe, where is God in this?” I had no answer. The question haunted me throughout the day. I walked home and prayed and – nothing. Next morning I returned to work and saw my colleagues and friends greeting a new day and new challenges. It then dawned on me, that God was manifestly present in what we were doing, that he was present in the suffering of that child, in his parents’ anguish and in our attempts to restore life and hope. In those moments when God seemed to be remote, he was intimately involved and it was through us that his words and promises were becoming flesh.

Love in community

The religious community that I joined as a young man is Carmel. They take their inspiration from a radical leader of his people, the Prophet Elijah, and a young girl who gave her all to God – Mary, the mother of Jesus. The charism of the Carmelite family is best expressed in its motto: ‘I am filled with jealous zeal for the Lord God of Hosts’. This ‘jealous zeal’ is what attracted me to the community and is something I find most in our young Church.

As a university chaplain, my first task was to create a space, both worshipping and informal, where community could happen. This requires an element of vulnerability, sharing who you are as a person rather than hiding behind a ministry. Late night conversations over coffee and doughnuts brought fundamental questions to the fore. What struck me most about this time is the deep thirst for justice that was expressed by the students. In spontaneous prayer, individuals led the liturgical assembly into an awareness of the needs of others. The concern of house-mates for one another when life had become complicated was real and rooted. The students did not want to be bystanders in the lives of others, but brothers and sisters. When looking at the images we have of God we can find our perceptions very limited. Some experience God as a remote and patriarchal figure. Others have the hangover from childhood of an old man with a big book writing down the things we do wrong. Forming an image of God that is gospel-oriented is a major advance in the maturing of faith. A God who, because of his love for us, could not be just a spectator in the mess of our lives, but who yearned to be in the mess with us – a God Incarnate – was the God we shared and worshipped as a community. Filled with ‘jealous zeal’, my congregation of young committed Christians who wanted to change the world, changed me.

In an age where many seem isolated, community speaks to the young. A community where I have encountered love without compromise is Craig Lodge in Dalmally, set in the Scottish highlands. This flourishing community of married couples, families and single young people who choose to share their lives, talents and brokenness, is a place where that ‘jealous zeal’ has another face. The young people I meet there amaze me. Many have had a difficult past, they come and realise that they are both loved and able to love. The tensions of community life are as real there as anywhere, but they love each other anyway. In all the places I have been, that is the place where Eucharist is not merely a noun, but a verb, something to be lived out as well as celebrated.

Community life is a parable of the Eucharist. Gathering, telling the story and breaking bread together are the ingredients of life together. In my own family, meals have always been a time of joy and

sharing. It is in the Eucharist that we encounter the generosity of God: this is my body for you. God can give us nothing more – God has already given us everything. Prayer is the fuel of the Christian life. ‘Lord, teach us to pray,’ is the cry of the Christian through the ages. Our young people are hungry for a spiritual life. Communities such as Craig Lodge lead people into a life of prayer, gathering throughout the day to be reminded of how God is present to them.

Pilgrimage

In July 2008 I had the privilege to accompany 170 young people to World Youth Day in Sydney. I must be honest and say that I was not looking forward to the trip. I am not a great flyer and this became an obstacle to my enjoyment of the prospect. However, from the moment we met in the chapel at Heathrow until the day we returned my days were filled with joy. Our young people are amazing. Those who knew no-one were soon making new friends, lives were shared on the long journey and I was deeply moved by the enthusiasm around me. Again as stories were told I was humbled by the experiences of the pilgrims. A turning point for the whole group was a celebration of Reconciliation. Suddenly the reason for the journey was apparent to all; we were there to be loved, and in that love to recognise Christ. These moments of pilgrimage are times when our young Church claims faith for themselves. Faith has become strong, community has become theirs, because in the words of St John of the Cross, ‘Christ is mine and all for me!’ Pilgrimage gives us that assurance. Christ is for us, we

are for Christ and we celebrate his presence in one another.

I have enjoyed the opportunity to be with our young people. I hope and pray that I will continue to have my life enriched by them. The media tells us that we live in a society where the young run wild and have no sense of responsibility or consequence. These words seem to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Where were the journalists when, in this last summer of 2008, four hundred young people went with Westminster Diocese to Lourdes as helpers, or when three hundred young people went to the diocesan youth festival at London Colney, or when two thousand young people from these islands travelled to Sydney for the World Youth Day? Where are the stories of hope that abound in our communities and why aren't they being told?

Have great faith – the Church is alive and the Church is young!

Damian Cassidy trained as a nurse in Guy's Hospital, London. He joined the Carmelite order in 1996 and was ordained priest in 2003. Since 2002 he has worked primarily with young adults in retreat, university chaplaincy and parish ministry. He is currently assistant priest at the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes, New Southgate, and chaplain to Spec and Spec Loft, the residential retreat centres of the Diocese of Westminster's youth programme. He is part of a team of six priests providing youth chaplaincy in the diocese.