

“LET THE BOAT SAIL FREE”

A Reflection

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the name of the shop: THE TRUTH SHOP. They sold truth there.

The salesgirl was very polite: What type of truth did I wish to purchase, partial truth or whole truth? The whole truth, of course. No deceptions for me, no defences, no rationalisations. I wanted my truth plain and clear and whole. She waved me on to another side of the store where the whole truth was sold.

The salesman there looked at me compassionately and pointed to the price tag. ‘The price is very high, sir,’ he said. ‘What is it?’ I asked, determined to get the whole truth, no matter what it cost. ‘If you take this,’ he said, ‘You will pay for it by losing all repose for the rest of your life.’

I walked sadly out of the store. I had thought I could have the whole truth at little cost. I am still not ready for truth. I crave for peace and rest every now and then. I still need to deceive myself a little with my defences and rationalisations. I still seek the shelter of my unquestioned beliefs.

(Anthony de Mello: The Song of the Bird)

*There was a young child,
so the story goes — a
real city boy — comfortable
with cars + skyscrapers + lights + shops
and streets with the*

When I received Brian Garrone’s invitation to put together a few thoughts that might help us reflect during these days, I felt at once an excitement and a foreboding. I believe that the excitement stemmed from the fact that I was to be part of a vibrant and

adventurous group that was ready to search boldly and creatively for a future that we know so little about at present. The foreboding came from a sense of my own confusion and groping for meaning in a world that seems to be adrift.

That image of a world adrift jumped out at me given the theme chosen for this gathering. Sailing free and being adrift are two totally different things. While the latter denotes purposelessness and a loss of direction, the former implies a leap in faith, a launching out into the deep, a readiness to assume responsibility for the future. A whole series of questions prompted themselves:

** Had an image of
a New Exp.
Rowing =
Sailing =*

- what*
Who is the boat?
- Why does the boat need to be set free?
- Who is in the boat?
- What is keeping the boat tied?
- Is the boat in dock, dry dock or the open seas?
- What will happen if the boat is set free?
- How does one set this boat free?

I do not have the answers to any of these questions, and yet I feel good about that. I do not need to have the answers. That is why we are here: to reflect together. This is why the open space has been made available. All I wish to do is to offer some thoughts in this open space, to create some space for our God to be named. *I will go to the SS '1 that is where I always go when I wish to test my life experience. So please bear with me.*

In the Gospels there are some very definite requests from the disciples which echoed the deep searching of the early Church. John the Evangelist has the first two disciples ask Jesus: "Lord, where do you stay?" The Synoptics portray the apostles coming to Jesus and saying, "Lord, teach us how to pray". Later on Philip again says to the Master, "Lord, show us the Father". These requests reflect the mind and heart of the early Christians who strove to experience the God of Jesus of Nazareth.

In my travels around our Christian Brother world, I too have found a deep desire for God among all types of people, young, middle-aged and old. There is a thirst for God in our world. This thirst often translates itself into a thirst for meaningful community experiences - - the belief that our God is discovered in meaningful human relationships.

Seeking God and seeking Community living: these are two deeply felt needs of our age.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reveals new beginnings in Jesus' name. Chapters one to five speak of a time of Pentecost: a Church is born. The fullness and completion of God's love is seen as never before. The community that gathered in Jesus' name assumes a specific character: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and community life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts: 2, 42 - 44). United by a renunciation of all private property, the activity of this community is full of power, boldness and courage. *Note the emphasis on unity, common prayer, sharing.*

In chapter 6 as numbers increase new problems become manifest. There is tension between the Jews of Hebrew antecedents and those of Hellenistic ^{Greek} background. The charism which was stressed so much in the preceding chapters and which was the hallmark of the new fledgling church is now under attack. The sharing in common and the unity which gave them their character is now being questioned. Notice the way the early Church under the leadership of the apostles handles this. There is no apportioning of blame. They decide it is not correct for them to step in themselves: we cannot neglect the Word of God to give out bread! Note the centrality of the Word of God to the life of the community. They ask the community to elect seven people. Seven men are chosen -- seven good people -- all with the qualities that Paul later on will want for his bishops (cf. 2 Timothy).

⑦ It appears that in the daily distribution of food, the Greek speaking Jews were being neglected.

*Included in his is Stephen
in the 12110s the first martyr*

The amazing thing is that all seven were Hellenists!! They are called "Associates" and show great sensitivity to the new cultural group. *The point of unity is the uniqueness of Jesus, not a particular theology or culture.*

I wish to spend a minute or two speaking about some of the implications for the early Church, The three leaders of the early Church, James, Peter and Paul, each brought a certain understanding of what the new community should be like. James, the most Jewish of them, kept all the main prescriptions commanded by Judaism: Circumcision, The Law and Temple Worship. Peter was respectful of the Law and the Temple, but felt that Circumcision was not needed by the new group gathered in Jesus' name. Paul did away with both Circumcision and the Law in deference to his Gentile converts, but continued to worship in the Temple. It was left to Stephen, who in his teaching and practice, did away with all three. The radicality of Christianity and its eventual break with Judaism came through this outsider to the core group: the only temple is the Christian Community and faith in Jesus! Because of this separation from traditional Judaism, persecution breaks out and the new Church has to flee its centre in Jerusalem and go to Antioch and eventually to Rome. God uses strange ways to spread the message! The Hellenists from now on take over the Church!

What is all this saying to us about the Edmund Rice Family?

I In letting the boat sail free we need to give it the same understanding, the same freedom, the same rights. Great openness is needed. We have no idea of the implications of our actions, just as the early Church did not have any idea of the forces they would unleash. Love bases itself on trust.

I believe at the heart of the Christian message is the call to community, a community seeking one heart and one mind -- the

heart and mind of Jesus. That unity needs to be preserved and deepened, and should be a visible sign of the love that calls us together. We who gather round the charism of Blessed Edmund give witness to a special aspect of the heart and mind of Jesus. We bring a special dimension to the compassion with which Jesus saw the world. *Gospel concern is at the core of this community*

I also believe that only if we have this heart and mind, will we be able to trust in the God who is leading us today into uncharted waters. Only this will enable us to sail in freedom and to throw off the ropes that keep our boat moored. Without it we will be too scared to change our way of being.

Do you remember Jesus telling his disciples about the house built on sand and the house built on stone? Listen to his words:

Everyone who hears these words of mind and acts on them will be like someone wise enough to build a house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mind and does not act on them will be like the foolish person who built a house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell -- and great was its fall!

Both houses suffer the same hardships:

Rain fell

floods came

winds blew and beat on that house

but the results are ever so different, and the final outcome in one case is total disaster! The point of the metaphor is that both persons listen to the Word. But one ACTS on it, the other doesn't.

What is particularly significant is the place of this saying in the gospel of Matthew: at the very end of the Sermon on the Mount. Having outlined the manifesto of his new vision of humankind, the world and the mystery of God, Jesus , now at the very end, challenges us with an option. Either put your money where your mouth is or shut up!

The Edmund Rice Family is not an “Old Boys’ Club”, or an occasion for a social evening. It is something more. Those of us gathered here are searching for ways in which we can feed the fire that burns within us, that disturbs us in the midst of life. I have felt that fire. You too feel it, calling you to something more in life. Just before I left Rome I read a book called “Fran’s War” by Sally Trench, a middle-aged English woman, mother of two grown up sons. She tells of how as she watched the scenes of the atrocities in Bosnia on television, she felt that as a responsible member of the human race, she just could not sit back and continue life. A fire burned within her. The Spirit of God was overshadowing her as it did another woman two thousand years ago. She heard ^{the divine presence with deep meaning} the ^{presence} persistence of God’s Word echoing in her very depths. And she acted. She built her foundations well. The book speaks of her extraordinary fortitude in following up on what she wanted to do, and how she awoke the conscience of so many people of good will. Like the early Church she too acted with power, with boldness and with courage.

What is it that prompts a group of women in Monsefu, Peru, to gather regularly in prayer in order to help those worse off than themselves? They direct a breakfast kitchen for children, an evening soup kitchen for the poor and elderly, and an alternative pharmacy for the poor. Why should some parents in one of our richest schools in the world -- Cardinal Newman College, Buenos Aires, -- work in the barrios of the city for children they normally wouldn't allow their sons to mix with? How is it that in the forgotten tenements of the copper-belt in Zambia, slum women training families to care for AIDS victims, now expand their ministry to care for disabled children? Why do so many teachers gather under the umbrella of the Callan Services in Papua New Guinea to reach out to disabled young people? I could go on and on. In our worldly wise society, this is madness. And yet each of these has, like you, heard the story of Blessed Edmund, felt a fire burning within and responded to it. I notice too that in ^{nearly} every one of these instances the beneficiaries of their endeavours are marginalised young people. Gathering in the name of Jesus and living the story of Blessed Edmund Rice moves people to respond to the urgings of the Spirit.

Your own ER camps
Sierra Leone
Ben, a teacher
Sudan
W: Lewis
Cork
Care of the Aged
SITAB

Two hundred years ago, William Wordsworth, the English poet, in *Tintern Abbey* wrote these beautiful lines:

I have learned
 To look on nature, not as in the hour
 Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
 The still, sad music of humanity...
And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused....
 A motion and a spirit that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.

We too, you and I, have felt this presence that disturbs and impels us -- the presence of God, the Spirit of Jesus. That is why we are gathered here. The amazing thing about this presence is that it enables us to do things we would not normally attempt. I read somewhere that the Christian life, at its core, is *martyria*. Roughly translated as ‘martyrdom’ it does not primarily mean the risking of possessions and life, but rather that we Christians gamble with our understanding of belief in the course of our encounters. We leave ourselves open to being transformed by the people and events of life. We are ready to submit our understanding of the world, of God and of our faith to the test of dialogue. We have no guarantee that our understanding will emerge unaltered from this dialogue. Over these days let us pray that we leave ourselves open to God and to one another so that our understanding may be changed and we are able to put on this mind of Jesus who becomes alive and active when two or three gather in God’s name. This will be God’s great gift to us.

Allow me to share with you one of my favourite passages from Luke’s Gospel. In 10:23 ff he tells us that Jesus gathered his disciples together separately and says to them:

*“Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!
For I tell you that many prophets and kings
desired to see what you see, but did not see it,
and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”*

Immediately after this, we have the scribe coming up to Jesus and asking him about the great commandment. Jesus quotes back to him from the Torah: “Love God and love your neighbour”. This is followed by the parable of the Good Samaritan and then the little story about Martha and Mary. The beauty is that all this is one interconnected whole. The Good Samaritan and the example of Mary show love of neighbour and love of God in action. But also implicit is the whole business of seeing and hearing that Jesus shares with

his disciples. The priest and levite also **saw** the robbed and abandoned body by the side of the road. However, the Samaritan **saw differently**. Martha also **heard** the words of Jesus as she served him, but Mary **heard differently**. We need the eyes and ears of a true disciple if we are to act as one.

To have this new vision means looking at success and at failure, at death and at life differently. Jesus dies on the cross, a criminal, in shame and disgrace, a failure, lonely and abandoned. Today if we see our Church in Australia ignored, irrelevant, humbled and the Christian Brothers ageing, shamed, reviled, dying, what does it mean? What are we implying when we say that in spite of this we find energy and the Spirit at work in the Edmund Rice Family? Whose Spirit do we feel? Where has it come from? Which experience is it being born out of? Who is the Boat?

Why do we wish to be part of the Edmund Rice Family? For some it gives the opportunity to do something for marginalised people. For others it gives an experience of community. Still others are attracted to it, because of the impact of a particular Christian Brother. These are all important starting points, but they cannot remain the reason for our continuing to walk this particular journey. Our reason is a deep, ongoing response to the God who has disturbed our lives and calls us on an incredible adventure of love.

The approaching millennium could mark a moment of new life: of new beginnings or life-changes, personally or communally. But it could equally well pass with no more significance than yesterday's news, broken promises from long-forgotten Lents, or abandoned Resolutions from New Years gone by. So perhaps as we approach the millennium, we need a stimulus, a reminder, some new way to make choices.

“Jesus said that in his society there is a new way for people to live:

You show wisdom by trusting people
You handle leadership by serving;
You tackle offenders by forgiving’
You deal with money by sharing;
You relate with enemies by loving;
You counter violence by suffering;
And you live life by choosing.

In fact you have a new attitude towards everything, towards everybody, because this is a Jesus society. And you repent, not by feeling bad, but by thinking differently.”

(Rudy Wiebe, The Blue Mountains of China)

As the century ends and each new day of grace dawns, could that be our rule: *to think differently and act accordingly?* But thinking differently is among the most difficult things imaginable; it is so hard, so mind-bending, to think our thought is wrong. Not that we deny specific error or wrongdoing; but the actual way we think is so resistant to change. Yet as Christians committed to our own conversion we must address this, and urgently.

*Mother Teresa: Prayer expands
the heart.*

Gamble everything for love
If you’re a true human being.
If not, leave this gathering.
Half-heartedness doesn’t reach into majesty.
You set out to find God
But then you keep stopping for long periods
At mean-spirited road houses.

(Jalaluddin Rumi)