

Comment

Coping with 'them'

Where are those 'men of good will' that are still written about from time to time? Given their support, said a journalist recently, the Summit meeting could lead to something.

There is a lot of work at the moment for the 'men of good will', not to mention the women. This number of *New Blackfriars* is coming out in the month of the Summit and of the Synod too: both of them meetings called to explore the chances of building bridges across what sometimes look like dangerously wide chasms. By the time the number reaches you Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev will have already met and spoken and gone their separate ways, and the Extraordinary Synod summoned by the Pope to size up what has been happening in the Catholic Church since Vatican II will already be well in session. In fact, by the time the number reaches some of our readers the Synod, too, will be a past event. There is still, though, something touching on the Summit and Synod left to be talked about—and it is something which also touches very directly on our daily lives.

It would be difficult to walk accidentally into one of those two meetings of powerful men and confuse it with the other, even if you were colour-blind, but one of the things they have in common is this: that the thousands of people who have written about them in advance have, by and large, been either excessively optimistic or excessively pessimistic about their outcomes. As Marx and others told us long ago, it is hellishly hard to see things as they actually are. And that, of course, is true of the people who sit in these meetings as well as the people who write about them.

Is there anything the 'men of good-will'—and the women of good-will—can do about this? There are some things that all the good will in the world can do nothing about, we are apt to say.

Supposing, though, we ask ourselves what it means to be a person of good will. In this number the third-world bishop Pedro Casaldáliga tells us what he would be ready to do to make 'men and women of good will in the first world' aware of the realities of the third-world situation, and, from what he says next, he clearly assumes that being a 'person of good will' means in the first place being a person seeking to 'be freer, more aware, more critical and self-critical', not 'drunk so easily on Coca Cola'. Arguably, being a person of good will involves a kind of mental asceticism, and the signs are that more and more of us everywhere, whatever we call ourselves, will have to cultivate this mental asceticism if we want to survive.

As differences deepen, more and more of us are having to live alongside people and power groups that are not just 'nasty', but whose aims, values and ways of thinking are nearly all profoundly repellent and threatening to us. Whether we are sitting in a summit conference,

or working in a tension-stricken Church, as in Nicaragua, or living in Tottenham's Broadwater Farm Estate, in north London, where a policeman was lately lynched, we are having to cope with the hateful 'them'.

In some places in the world the people with the upper hand cope with 'them' by not giving 'them' an inch, concentrating instead on breaking 'them'. Long-term, this is rarely practical politics, but it is the doctrine of 'national security' favoured by, for example, many of Latin America's recent right-wing military regimes. For these people, any kind of negotiation with 'them' is out of the question; the motives of 'them' must be sinister all the time. It is thinking also found in the right wing of the Latin American Church (Cardinal Obando of Nicaragua has adopted it lock, stock and barrel). And, alas, like AIDS it is breaking out in the most surprising places.

After all, Mrs Thatcher's law and order campaign, which is giving the British police almost as much power as the South African police and is making any peaceful protesting rather a risky business, is a product of exactly the same kind of thinking. She is by no means the first politician to have cashed in on people's fear and hate and ignorance. It is an easy option, especially when you are getting very unpopular.

It is much harder to listen seriously to people whose ideas and aims you may profoundly dislike, in order to see if, without compromising yourself or your own overall aims, or smearing over the real differences, you can find any common ground at all—just so as to make a tiny corner of the world temporarily a slightly safer and more humane place. It is a readiness to try to do this or to help others to do this—a readiness, first and last, to practice the mental asceticism needed to see things a little more as they actually are and to take people seriously—which is at the core of what it means to be a person of good will.

In Britain there are signs again in some of the opinion polls of what has been called 'a streak of concern for community'. What sort of example, though, is being offered by Christianity to those who today would be men and women of good will? By and large, Christians have never been good at listening seriously to people whom they disapprove of. Yet the summons to serious listening of the kind written about here is to be found in the very foundations of Christianity: not only in what Jesus had to say about the way we should treat enemies and what St Paul had to say about the need for Christians to have short-term as well as long-term objectives, but in the scandalous central claim that Christ died not for an abstract 'humanity' but for us as individuals, dying for the oppressor as well as the oppressed. The kind of serious listening written about here is not humourless listening—in fact it is the opposite of that. The Christian revelation is God's big joke. Perhaps when we begin to find the sense of humour to laugh at it we shall begin to see the world around us more clearly also ... and get other people to laugh and find their sight too.

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