

Còmhradh – Argyll Faith and Culture Conversation

Glencruitten House, 24-25 October 2014

“Faith and Politics” - Summary of Proceedings

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome everyone to the còmhradh. This is the fifth in a series of conversations which aim to address the apparent disconnect between Christian faith and “the way we live now”, what we call, for short, “faith and culture”. By culture, we mean not tartan and bagpipes but the deep, underlying worldview which governs the way we think and act, the frame of reference which shapes the way we see the world and understand our human reality. Believing in God and following Jesus have been part of that frame of reference for many in Argyll across centuries but today these elements seem to be fading away. A great many of our contemporaries seem to find that they can do fine without any transcendent reference at all. So they live their lives in ways which often are rich and fulfilling in many respects but which apparently have no real place for faith in God or Christian discipleship. So we ask ourselves: how could this disconnect be overcome? How could a renewed connection be formed between the world of our contemporaries and the realities to which Christian faith bears witness? It is a question that calls for a large canvas but we also seek to be rooted in the local context of Argyll.

In terms of participants it aims to be open and inviting to all who feel interested in the question it addresses. Specifically, it aims to be open both to those who remain involved in Argyll church life and those who feel alienated from existing church life but still cherish their faith. And to those who are a bit of both.

It is important for the còmhradh that there is no official organization that is responsible for it. It is a freelance initiative. It stands or falls simply on the strength of its ability to offer something worthwhile. It has deliberately chosen an open space which has its risks and drawbacks but which means that it is free of the inhibitions which come with institutional interests and constraints. With this in mind we are so grateful to Dave for welcoming us to the ever-hospitable, commodious and nourishing environment of Glencruitten House.

So we gather here a couple of times a year for an extended conversation which aims to see how far we can get in attaining clarity in understanding where our contemporary culture is going and what it means for faith; as well as where contemporary faith is going and what it means for culture. It is a chance to step back from the action for a little while, to reflect upon it with a view to returning to it with sharper understanding and renewed motivation – what has sometimes been called the action-reflection cycle.

We are still very much a work-in-progress but we have developed a few modes of operation that seem to work for us. There is not very much in the way of

prepared script. When the aim is conversation, we need to “hear each other into speech” rather than listening all the time to talks from a script. But we have found it useful to have some short contributions which set the scene for different phases of the conversation. We have also found it useful to have some outdoor time as well as indoor time, taking advantage of the wonderful setting here at Glencruitten. We have found that it is good to frame the conversations with worship, having regular opportunities to process things at the spiritual level. We have found that it is good to punctuate the concentrated conversations with more relaxed times when we can enjoy getting to know one another over a cup or a plate.

We have also found that it helps to get focus if each occasion takes up a specific theme. We keep a simple record of each còmhradh and these records are available on the Còmhradh page of the Faith in Argyll website.

Our planning group was prescient this time to realize that the intersection of faith and political life might be a good place for us to be at this juncture. More than we had expected the referendum turned out to be an energizing and thought-provoking experience for many people. Now it is natural to ask, what next? And we ask this question with the faith dimension very much in mind.

Readings from Opening Worship

Micah 6:8-9 The Message (MSG)

But he’s already made it plain how to live, what to do,
what God is looking for in men and women.
It’s quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbour,
be compassionate and loyal in your love,
And don’t take yourself too seriously—
take God seriously.
Attention! God calls out to the city!
If you know what’s good for you, you’ll listen.
So listen, all of you!
This is serious business.

“In Those Years” Adrienne Rich

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of *we*, of *you*
we found ourselves
reduced to *I*
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and, yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying *I*.

Opening Conversation

Introduction – Ken Ross

One thing that is important to say at this particular còmhradh is that this is a safe space where all of us are cherished regardless of how different our opinions may be. Actually, the whole of Scotland has been a safe space to a remarkable degree given the political polarization we have experienced. But especially here in our conversation it is important to remember that we are aiming to listen each other into speech, to draw into expression the half-formed thoughts and ideas that we would not be able to bring to maturity on our own. In this exercise the one you most need to hear, the one you most need to understand is the one with whom you most strongly disagree.

Like almost any mixed group coming together in Scotland it is very likely that some of us have voted “no” and others have voted “yes” in the recent referendum. But before we come to potential points of disagreement can I invite us to ponder a little the experience of participating in such a momentous democratic occasion?

I have just returned from South Africa where for many people this year marks the 20th anniversary of the time that they were first able to vote. Even after the passage of 20 years that experience remains profound. On Tuesday I was in Inanda in Kwa-Zulu Natal. This is where one of the first Christian missions in Zululand was established and it was a product of the Inanda Mission, John L. Dube, who became the first President of the ANC when it was formed in 1912. Dube’s grave is there, much revered. It was at Inanda that Nelson Mandela chose to cast his vote in the 1994 election. For him too, of course, the first time in his life that he was able to vote. After voting he walked the short distance from the polling station to the grave of John Dube. He stood solemnly in front of the grave and said: “Mr President, I have come to report to you that South Africa is now free.” It is a spine-chilling moment to imagine all the meaning that was packed into that sentence.

But here in Scotland we have had our own spine-chilling experiences with democratic participation in the past little while. I wonder if a few of us might call to mind what it felt like to be casting a vote on such a momentous day as our referendum. This is probably not the time to say whether you were fervently hoping for yes or fervently hoping for no – perhaps we will come to that. But could we first express a little of what it was like to participate in such a huge democratic moment?

Conversation

All shared a sense of having been part of a momentous occasion. Feelings included: a sense of disappointment in having a postal vote because it meant not having the experience of actually walking into the polling station to cast a vote; pride that Scotland was succeeding in completing this huge democratic exercise in a peaceful manner; conflicted feelings about the outcome, e.g. voting “No” but hoping that the outcome would be “Yes”; a sense of surprise that, given the magnitude of the occasion, in Argyll you could easily be the only person at the polling station at the time you went to vote; deep concern to have an empathetic understanding of the other side, especially of the losing side – their feelings of disappointment and sorrow.

Alan Reid MP

Alan Reid shared his reflections on how the Referendum had been a vote for or against an idea – as opposed to a normal election when it is a matter of parties and individuals standing for office. There is alienation from the democratic process because people are distrustful towards the fallible human beings who are their elected representatives. In the case of the Referendum, this element of distrust was set aside and people engaged in greater numbers and with greater passion. He reflected on his experience as an MP where he has observed that people become highly engaged with “single issues” such as school closures in Argyll or Israeli bombing of Gaza but have very limited interest in the entirety of the political process, much of which is necessarily routine and “boring”. How could we foster an ongoing popular engagement with the entirety of the political process?

Among points raised in discussion were:

- How can we promote more local democracy, i.e. enabling more decisions to be taken at a more local level and mobilizing a high level of participation in such a process?
- How can the passion of the 45% who voted for independence be captured for the task of taking the nation forward after the “No” vote in the Referendum?
- How can the whole nation move forward as a unit, rather than half being disillusioned or left behind?
- How will the Scottish Parliament make use of the greater powers about to be devolved, assuming that the Westminster parties fulfill their promises? Will it use the new powers to create a fairer society and a more participatory democracy?
- How will a shared public discourse take shape, given loss of confidence in the BBC due to lack of impartiality in the Referendum and rapid decline of the Scottish broadsheet newspapers?

Saturday

Readings from Worship

Isaiah 35 New International Version - UK (NIVUK)

Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.'

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.

Mahatma Gandhi

“Man often becomes what he believes himself to be. If I keep on saying to myself that I cannot do a certain thing, it is possible that I may end by really becoming incapable of doing it. On the contrary, if I have the belief that I can do it, I shall surely acquire the capacity to do it even if I may not have it at the beginning.”

“You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is like an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.”

Opening Conversation

We began by sharing episodes from the referendum campaign which made an impression on us, calling to mind episodes which disturbed, annoyed, surprised and inspired us. There was a shared amazement at the depth of feeling that was engendered by the Referendum and the intensity of participation.

Reflecting on the significance of the Referendum points made included the following:

- Politics will not be the same again. The political landscape has permanently changed (this was illustrated by the resignation of Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont the previous evening).
- There is a serious risk that the rushed process of devolving more powers will be botched and that tension between Westminster and Holyrood will remain unresolved going forward.
- Regardless of politics a new consciousness has been created in Scotland – the big question is what will we do with it?
- Faith has a role to play in bringing a challenge to questions of identity and needs to be part of the conversation as the question of national identity takes centre stage in our politics.
- There is tension between the church's role as a force for reconciliation and its prophetic voice. The church's role is not to take one side or the other in a political contest but to speak out strongly on vital moral principles.
- One key principle relates to the issue of poverty. Current neglect of the poor has far-reaching consequences and this is a matter of vital concern for the churches.

Readings offered by Bridgid Hess, prompting thoughts of “the Argyll we imagine” (based on *Making Peace* by Joy Mead)

Words have no meaning on their own, but the meanings we make for them in the context of society and our dominant belief systems. Words can mean many things.

Ecclesiastes 3 1-8

For everything its season; and for every
Activity under the sun its time:
A time to be born and a time to die;
A time to plant and a time to uproot;
A time to kill and a time to heal;
A time to break down and a time to build up;
A time to weep and a time to laugh;
A time for mourning and a time for dancing
A time to scatter stones and a time to gather them;
A time to embrace and a time to abstain from embracing;
A time to seek and a time to lose;
A time to keep and a time to discard;
A time to tear and a time to mend;
A time for silence and a time for speech;
A time to love and a time to hate....

“I would pick more daisies” by Nadine Stair

If I had to live my life over again
I'd dare to make more mistakes the next time.
I'd relax;
I would limber up;
I'd be sillier than I've been this trip.
I would take fewer things seriously;
I would take more trips,
I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers;
I would eat more ice-cream and less beans.
I would perhaps have more troubles
But I would have fewer imaginary ones.
You see I am one of those people
Who live seriously and sanely
Hour after hour, day after day.
I've had my moments and if I had to do it over again,
I'd have more of them.
In fact I'd try to have nothing else –
Just moments, one after another –
Instead of living so many years ahead of each day.
I've been one of those people who never goes
Anywhere without a thermometer
A hot-water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute
If I had to do it again I would travel lighter.
If I had to live my life over I would start
Barefoot earlier in the Spring
And stay that way later in the Fall.
I would go to more dances,
I would ride more merry-go-rounds and....
I would pick more daisies

Wolfgang Sachs: “on the ... poor”

... the remark slipped out: 'it's all very well, but, when it comes down to it, these people are still terribly poor. 'Promptly, one of my companions stiffened: 'Not somos pobres, somos Tepitanos! (we are not poor people, we are Tepitans.)
What a reprimand! Why had I made such an offensive remark? I had to admit to myself in embarrassment that, quite involuntarily, the clichés of development philosophy had triggered my reaction.

'... poverty' on a global scale was discovered after the Second World War: before 1940 it was not an issue.'

.... Up until the present day, development politicians have viewed 'poverty' as the problem and 'growth' as the solution. They have not yet admitted that they have been largely working with a concept of poverty fashioned by the experience of commodity-based need in the Northern hemisphere. With the less well-off homo oeconomicus in mind, they have encouraged growth – and often produced destitution by bringing multifarious cultures of frugality to ruin. For the culture

of growth can only be erected on the ruins of frugality and so destitution and dependence on commodities are its price.

Is it not time after forty years to draw a conclusion? Whoever wishes to banish poverty must build on efficiency; a cautious handling of growth is the most important way of fighting poverty.

It seems my friend from Tepito knew of this when he refused to be labeled 'poor'. His honour was at stake, his pride too; he clung to his Tepito form of sufficiency, perhaps sensing that without it there loomed only destitution or never-ending scarcity of money.....

Think about : when did you hear anyone say 'I am poor'?

From *The Myth of Progress* by Yvonne Burgess

We think we owe our livelihoods to economics and technology. But in fact we owe our lives to the basic social values which our economics-obsessed culture treats with contempt. Our mothers looked after us as we grew up largely out of such non-economic values; and no matter how rich or well-insured or heavily policed we are, Westerners (particularly middle-class Westerners) would not be able to rest easily in our beds, or rely on our bank accounts, were it not for the impeccable social values of the poor, both here and everywhere else. Their decency, generosity, and restraint allow us to feel safe, even when we walk around their countries as tourists, carrying cameras worthy of a year's cash income to them.

.... We seriously underestimate how much we are indebted for our safety to the morality of the poor.

From *The Song of the Bird* by Anthony de Mello

THE CONTENTED FISHERMAN

The rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find the Southern fisherman lying lazily beside his boat, smoking a pipe.

'Why aren't you out fishing?' said the industrialist.

'Because I have caught enough fish for the day,' said the fisherman.

'Why don't you catch some more?'

'What would I do with it?'

'You could earn more money,' was the reply.

'With that you could have a motor fixed to your boat and go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats... maybe even a fleet of boats. Then you would be a rich man like me.'

'What would I do then?'

'then you could really enjoy life.'

'What do you think I am doing right now?'

From *Soil and Soul* by Alastair McIntosh

Properly used the word 'development' means what one dictionary defines as 'a gradual unfolding; a fuller working out of the details of anything; growth from within.' Real community development – integral human development – should therefore be about enabling a community to become more fully itself. And that's the trouble with having a grand scheme imposed from the outside: it tends to permanently disrupt the very fabric of a place. As such, it ain't true development.

Peace of the pure spring to you
Peace of the shy bog to you
Peace of the trickling stream to you
Peace of the foaming falls to you
Peace of the gathering force to you
Peace of the great river to you
Peace as you return home to you

Conversation

Points raised in the final round of conversation included:

- As we reflect on the question of "time" we recognize that the Referendum as a *kairos* moment, a time of opportunity, a moment of grace.
- The political engagement which has long been absent had now been revived and we move forward with a different spirit.
- The spirituality evident in the Yes campaign has a significance reaching far beyond one political outcome. It is important that it is inclusive going forward.
- Countering poverty is the most pressing issue in Scotland and needs to be taken seriously in the Argyll context also.
- We live with fractured communities. How can we foster a shared sense of the worth of our community life?
- Argyll has more than 2,000 voluntary organisations – can the new energy take these to new heights?
- It is important that people of faith play their part in the organizational life, e.g. through Community Councils and local government.
- There is need for a renewed sense of ownership and empowerment at the local level – people taking the development of their communities into their own hands.