

Còmhradh – Argyll Faith and Culture Conversation

SYHA, Oban, 26-27 October 2018

Crossing Borders: International, Communal, Personal

Summary of Discussions

Introduction

The focus of the October 2018 còmhradh was the question of borders. This is not so much a specific political event as an issue that has underpinned and driven much of the political momentum in our time. Arguably it was concern to “take back control” of our national borders that proved to be decisive in the 2016 vote for the UK to leave the European Union. Certainly it was a major feature of Donald Trump’s election campaign of that year.

A key plank in Donald Trump’s Presidential campaign was his pledge to build a “great, great wall” on the Mexican-American border. He justified his plan by alleging that, “[Mexico] are sending people that have lots of problems, and they are bringing those problems to us. They are bringing drugs, and bringing crime, and their rapists.” The new President referred to border protection three times during his short inauguration speech, stating that, “We’ve defended other nation’s borders while refusing to defend our own.” Trump also famously called for all Muslims to be banned from entering the USA, seeking a “total and complete shut-down” of the country’s borders to Muslims.

Borders and the defence of borders has come to prominence like never before. In some ways this comes as a surprise to many. Younger people, at least in the Western world, have grown up with a sense of being citizens of the world, free to travel and taking full advantage of modern communications. We are the internet generation – with digital technology at our fingertips that allows us to be connected worldwide regardless of physical borders. Many people have built up networks that transcend national boundaries. It might easily have looked as if borders were becoming less and less relevant.

This, mind you, might be a privileged perspective. Those with funds to travel and acquire digital technology can pay little heed to borders. But it is a different story for those in less favoured circumstances. John Hull, a blind theologian at the University of Birmingham, once observed: “The iron curtain has passed away and even the bamboo curtain hardly exists, but the place has been taken by the money curtain. We in the two-seventh rich world are surrounded by a money curtain which is like a one-way mirror. It is invisible to those of us on the inside because we can see right through it, but to the poor majority outside the money curtain it stands as a glittering barrier through which they cannot pass. We can go to them but they cannot come to us. Globalisation has conquered every area of human life except people.” Borders are gateways for some but barriers for others.

It is to the question of borders that we turned our attention over this weekend. The presenting issue is the international crisis around refugees, migrants and the rising xenophobia driving much of our political life today. Yet when we stop to think about it we realize that it is not just about politics out there, practised by other people. It comes home to our own communities and to our own thinking. Local communities too can create borders that include and exclude. Even in our own minds we can create borders that shape our life and interaction. The political question can also become very personal.

And this perhaps opens up the faith dimension to this question. Jesus seems to have been a subverter of borders. There were very firm lines drawn in his time between different categories of people. And he seemed to be often getting into hot water by crossing and challenging these boundaries. And the Christian faith has thrived on the crossing of borders. In fact, it has often grown stale when it is settled in a comfortable home. It has rediscovered its vitality in the action of crossing a border to enter a new context.

Borders – An Evening of Reflection led by Jan Sutch Pickard

Meeting with Còmhradh for the first time was memorable for me, and Oban Youth Hostel felt a good place to meet, with the movement of CalMac ferries in and out of the Bay being a reminder of our restless world.

But of course the theme was 'Borders', which prevent free movement, fend off other people with different lives and beliefs. We may erect walls - as the President of the USA keeps boasting he will do on the Mexican border (this is the man who said 'Barbed wire used properly can be a beautiful sight.') But the barriers we put up may also be mental ones, against those we see as 'others', those we suspect, prejudice or fear. Fear can be as divisive as any wall.

At the beginning of my contribution to the conversations, I shared recent experiences: first of entering America, and the unfriendly – even heavy-handed – process of Homeland Security, where everyone is treated with suspicion. Later in that visit, I and my small family there joined thousands of Americans in San Francisco, and nationwide, demonstrating against their government's treatment of Mexican migrants, the separation of families and small children behind bars. These experiences related to what is happening in just one country, in a world of borders.

I also shared with the group words heard recently, which challenged my thinking. They came from the very down-to-earth testimony of the skipper of a **Medecins sans Frontiers** rescue ship in the Mediterranean: 'The rescuers do not wear gloves.'

Surgical gloves, preventing skin-to-skin contact, are a practical way of preventing infection or contamination – but they can represent fear of 'otherness', give a message that someone is 'untouchable'. It's yet another kind of border. The rescue boat is called the **Dignity**, and the practice of its crew affirms the dignity of those in need, through the humanity of touch. What does that say to us, in our daily relationships?

My main contribution, though, was share my encounter with people in Palestine and Israel, cut off from each other by politics, a new kind of colonialism, religious dogma, prejudice and fear – and by the Separation Barrier, running for more than 100 miles round the West Bank Palestinian Territories (and often encroaching on them). Sometimes it is a high fence topped with razor wire, and sometimes a 26 foot wall of concrete slabs. Either way it is a shocking border to confront – not the kind of fence that proverbially 'makes good neighbours', for this is erected entirely at the will of one party – the State of Israel, an occupying power.

However, I was not giving a political talk, with the evidence and statistics I could have mustered, but witnessing to what I had seen, as an Ecumenical Accompanier, of the impact this 'border' has on the lives of ordinary people: the workers waiting for hours at a checkpoint, farmers who were cut off from their land, the young woman prevented by soldiers from passing through a gate to harvest olives, because she had reached puberty and no longer had the right permit, the young conscript soldiers brutalised by their task. I also described the impact on myself of coming up against this barrier. I used poems. Here are three (*Hitting the Wall, Just breathing, The flowers of the field*).

Thank you for inviting me to share these poignant experiences and the urgency of injustice at this particular border; and some of the physical shock and lingering questions with which borders of any kind confront us.

Hitting the Wall

There are so many good reasons
to keep on going:
life is not a race, but I was into my stride,
had found a pace that would carry me for miles –
the adrenaline kept flowing –
and then I came to the wall.

It was huge, heart-stopping.
It shut out the sky:
and it said No.
No way.
No hope:
you can't pretend I'm not here –
here to stay –
and I came to a full stop.

There are so many reasons
to keep on going
and becoming fully alive:
up to now, wholeheartedly,
I lived them all –
until hit the wall.

Jan Sutch Pickard

Just breathing

(Bethlehem 'Gilo' Checkpoint 300)

Dark and cold before dawn, where men
who rose much earlier, are waiting to go to work,
packed into long narrow pens that run
the length of the ramp, along that concrete wall,
scrawled with scorn and defiance: though in the dark
no-one can see the writing on the wall;
nor can you see the faces of these men
huddled together, leaning on the wire fence
which bulges with the weight of humanity
barely contained; all you can see is – here
a hand grasping a bar – there
breath puffed out in the chill air;
or spidering forms against the sky, trying to climb
into a cage already crammed, through razor wire;
weary with standing still for more than an hour,
a score of men are sitting down on the ground
by common consent, shoulder to shoulder,
their upturned faces catching what light there is;
here someone coughs... over there
a man lights a cigarette and passes it round;
no-one is talking – what is there to say?
Yet, filling the dark, a shapeless sound like grieving:
seven hundred men waiting for someone to open a gate,
hoping for a way out, and just breathing.

Jan Sutch Pickard

The flowers of the field

The poppy, the anemone –
blooming now after the spring rains –
they are different,
but both are as red as blood:

Scattered across hillsides
where settlers' children play,
cared for by teachers carrying guns;

Fragile among the rubble
where bulldozers groan
and fatherless children throw stones;

and, when the wall is built,
they will still be flowering on both sides,
fragile as human lives –
different, but both red as blood.

Jan Sutch Pickard

BORDERS IN THE BIBLE – A Reflection led by Marion MacGregor-White

OVERALL STRUCTURE FIRST AND LAST BOOKS OF THE BIBLE
AND GOSPEL- LIFE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS THE CHRIST.
SAVIOUR OF THE WORLD.

THE MINISTRY OF JESUS IN EARTH AND FROM HEAVEN

INDIVIDUAL LIVES IN THE BIBLE EXEMPLIFYING BORDERS OF VARIOUS
KINDS

OVERALL CONSTANT THEME RELATIONSHIP OF MAN TO GOD
LIGHT AND DARKNESS

SPECIFIC FOCUS GENESIS 1-3

GENESIS 1 The Creation. A Pictorial ---Pictorial Borders then.

GENESIS 2 Deeper implications. Supernatural as well as natural. Note Light and Dark physical and spiritual. Characters and setting move to specifics
v.8 Garden in Eden. Specifics and Specific location for man he put there. God is engaging with man.

v/9 Tells how. Tree of Life and tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil Focusing.
Perhaps menacingly to a degree on aspects of the outworking of God's creation.
There is to be mutual effect – man the garden God Himself.

v.9 River Water

Implication of unease. Roots of dis-ease. Flood prophesy of Noah

GENESIS 3 Ramps up unease 3:1 Creates interaction with these Borders God has set. Boundaries are drawn up and crossed.

The beginning of the story of man – of our individual stories of our Attitude first then Relationship with God.

At this point and for the rest of the O.T. a Stand Off between God and Man. A RELATIONSHIP OF UNEASE. OF ENTRAPMENT IN THE ENTANGLEMENT OF A BROKEN BOUNDARY man trying unsuccessfully to cover himself from God – again—only this time not the fig leaf but torment of unsuccessful would be Boundary pathways to sweetness and light once more. Before Adam and Eve realised that Borders of God apply to them.

UNTIL THE EXPLOSION OF THE STAND OFF. THE EXPLOSION OF EVERY BORDER PHYSICAL SPIRITUAL BETWEEN GOD AND MAN. Why did JESUS DO THIS? BECAUSE HE CAN LOVE AS WE CANNOT LOVE.

To truly survive spiritually we can do so only in His Love. No substitute will do. This Absolute Spiritual Fact is ascertained in the Light and Dark spiritual battleground via the Counterfeit.

HE CAN LOVE THROUGH EVERY BORDER – SOCIAL DISEASE DISBELIEF
KEY VERSE “And the veil of the temple was rent in two.”

KEY WORDS “Whosoever” “Only believe.”

GEOGRAPHIC BORDERS THE RED SEA AND THE JORDAN crossed in
PERSONAL SPIRITUAL --- any and every Border EXPLODED BY JESUS.

A BORDER OF PERFECTION Of absolute safety into THE PERFECT LAW OF LIBERTY.

NOTE HEBREWS 12:28 THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN US. Superceding all Borders of Men Religion Politics every Social aspect

MIRACLES OF JESUS THE UNEXPECTEDNESS DEMONIC POOL OF BETHESDA
WOMAN AT WELL BLIND BEGGAR ZACHEUS NICODEMUS

ROMAN CENTURIAN SAUL BECOMING PAUL tax collector MATTHEW becoming His Disciple.
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD RESTORED through individual CHOICE to CROSS OVER FROM DEATH of True Relationship with Him to TO LIFE – THE ACTUAL LIFE OF GOD HIMSELF SENT BY JESUS VIA THE HOLY SPIRIT FROM HEAVEN 24/7/365 to US!
THROUGH JESUS'S BORDERS EXPLODING BIRTH DEATH AND RESURRECTION. CHRIST IN US THE HOPE OF GLORY
OUR JOY COMPLETE John 15:11 & 16:24

INDIVIDUAL LIVES. BORDERS FAMILIAL SOCIAL RELIGIOUS POLITICAL EXPLODED. NOTE:- IN THE O.T selectively In the N.T. for all .
John 14:27 John 5:24 Hebrews 10:19-20 "NEW AND LIVING WAY."

Some examples ESTHER DAVID NOAH NAMAAN PHILEMON AND ONESIMUS THE PROPHETS RUTH, HANNAH, THE CALLING OF THE PATRIARCHS BY GOD INDIVIDUALLY AND HIS PROMISES TO THEM
THOSE HEALED AND RESTORED SPIRITUALLY PHYSICALLY MENTALLY DISCIPLES APOSTLES NAMAAN SLAVE GIRL WOMAN AT WELL THOSE JESUS HEALED AND CALLED LAZARUS ZACHEUS, MAN BORN BLIND, MARY MAGDALENE , FRIENDS OF JESUS, THIEF ON CROSS, ROMAN SOLDIER AT CROSS MARY MOTHER OF JESUS JOSEPH HER HUSBAND
JOSEPH SON OF ISAAC THE PATRIARCHS FROM ABRAHAM THROUGH ISAAC JACOB ; ABIGAIL PRODIGAL SON PARABLES GOOD SAMARITAN WINDOW AND VESSELS OF OIL

Disciples THE MULTITUDES IN JESUS' LIFETIME AND AT PENTECOST SENDING OF HOLY SPIRIT TO ALL MEN AS PROMISED. ACTS 2 BORDER OF RELATIONSHIP WIDENED TO ALL MEN – HEAVEN MEETS EARTH THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT- BORDERLESS FROM GOD THROUGH JESUS.
REMEMBER GENESIS AND JESUS AND ENSURE YOUR OWN BORDERS IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD ARE EXPLODED THROUGH THE RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION OF JESUS.

BUT WHAT ABOUT BORDERS IN THE LAST BOOK OF THE BIBLE REVELATION? BORDERS OF GENESIS REVISITED.

THE COMPLETION OF THE FULL STORY OF THE TRIUMPH OF JESUS OVER EVERYTHING - NOT JUST BOUNDARY - IGNORING MANKIND. Genesis 3 THE STORY OF GOD'S PEOPLE FROM THE O.T. BECOMING GOD'S CHURCH VENGEANCE OF JESUS AS HE FULFILLS PROPHECY TO SLAY THE EVIL ONE. TO TAKE HIS CHURCH TO HEAVEN AND TO FULFILL THE WORD OF GOD THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE THAT EVIL WILL BE CONQUERED AND THERE WILL BE A HEAVEN TO BE GAINED AND A HELL TO BE AVOIDED.

THIS IS JUDGMENT DAY WHEN JESUS COMES AS THE MIGHTY WARRIOR EXPECTED FROM BEFORE HE WAS BORN.

NOW THERE ARE ABSOLUTELY NO MORE BORDERS TO EXPLODE.

GOD IS KING. THERE IS ONLY ONE KINGDOM NOW – THE EARTH DISAPPEARS AND WE ARE BACK TO GENESIS 1 AND BEYOND THIS TIME TO THE VERY THRONE ROOM OF GOD. THIS TIME WITH

NOTHING MENACING AS PER GENESIS 2 AND 3. EVERYTHING MADE NEW. CREATION ITSELF MADE NEW AS WELL AS THE HEAVENS AND THE CHURCH AS THE BRIDE OF CHRIST – REVELATION . LIGHT BRIGHTER THAN EVER

CENTRAL TO THE STATE OF BEING AND DARKNESS BECOMING "OUTER DARKNESS." A PLACE OF ETERNAL BANISHMENT FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT THE CHURCH. FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NOT CHOSEN CHRIST AS THEIR LORD. THE KINGDOM OF GOD LIVES FOR EVER----- BOUNDARYLESS. GOD HIMSELF IS THE BOUNDARY. AND WE ARE IN THIS NEW ETERNAL LIVING BEING BOUNDARY PART OF HIS LIFE AND OF HIS ETERNAL UNCOMPARABLE BRIGHTNESS – RIGHT AT THE CENTRE OF IT - BEFORE HIS THRONE. SO WE SEE THAT BOUNDARIES WERE AND ARE ALL ABOUT US BEING RESTORED TO GOD AS HE INTENDED BEFORE HE SELF- SACRIFICIALLY CREATED THAT FIRST GARDEN FROM WHERE HE CHOSE TO LEAD US ACROSS THE BORDER OF HIS ENEMY ACROSS EVERY BORDER HIS ENEMY COULD FLING AT US --- AND TO LEAD US OUT IN HIS LOVE WITH ALL OF HIMSELF GIVEN FOR US --- HIS ALL FOR OUR LOVE. A BORDER SLASHED AT CALVARY. "Behold I have made all things ALL THINGS NEW." A NEW COSMOS. HEAVENS AND EARTH AND EVERYTHING ABOVE AND BENEATH THEM. A NEW ORDER OF ALL THINGS. THE KINGDOM OF LIGHT RESTORING THE BATTLEFIELD OF EARTH TO HEAVEN. DARKNESS BANISHED ONCE FOR ALL IN THIS FINAL DAY OF JUDGEMENT. JESUS THE MIGHTY WARRIOR WITH THE TWO EDGED SWORD. LORD TRIUMHANT AT LAST. AND -- - FOR US. LETS DO THIS FINAL BORDER WITHIN OURSELVES THE BORDER OF LOVE THE BORDERLESS BORDER – WHILE IT IS STILL DAY.

Borders within Local Communities – Councillor Roddy McCuish

Roddy reflected on borders in his own life – leaving school at age 15, discovering his skill as a footballer, living in Australia and Germany and returning to become a Councillor in Oban.

Many people create their own borders and have space only for their own clan or tribe. Yet it is possible to cross those boundaries and this is often the way to achieve good results in strengthening local communities and taking good political decisions.

Concluding Thoughts

- The people on the other side of the border are as anxious as I am.
- There is nothing to fear but fear itself.
- How all-consuming borders can become.
- Study in contrast – the Statue of Liberty and the US-Mexican border today.
- There can be a positive kind of border – children need boundaries.
- Borders are not just "over there" – we need to examine ourselves.
- "The rescuers do not wear gloves."