

Session IX

Case Studies of Regional Discord – Cyprus

The Very Rev. Stephen Collis (ACC)

The Cyprus Problem

“Activity for reconciliation in the areas of conflict ”

The Very Rev. Stephen Collis (Cyprus)

Greetings to you all from the beautiful Mediterranean island of Cyprus

I carefully looked at the programme for this conference and became rather concerned as to whether I would have anything original to say by this stage of the proceedings.

The title of this talk, as given to me by Rev. Joachim, is as stated ‘activity for reconciliation in the areas of conflict’.

Where do we go in our search for reconciliation in the areas of conflict around the world? Only this week I saw the name of a horse; - Generous Spirit! What can we do if we do not have such a spirit? In the search for reconciliation the great difficulty for me is human nature, human nature over the centuries down the ages? Has it changed? A philosophical question this may, be but I do seriously believe it must be addressed. Human beings have argued and fought and butchered each other for as long as our history can show, can it really be any different today. If these human beings who lived before our Lord Jesus Christ, during His life and since have never been able to bring about reconciliation between human beings what makes us believe we can do any better?

Let us take a look at a situation that has affected much of the world – that of human trafficking and slavery. In 1807 Great Britain passed legislation abolishing slave trading, Britain was neither the first to join the slave trade nor the last to leave, but its horrors are well documented.¹⁾

1) www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/slavery/about.htm

Two hundred years later as we meet here in Korea it is estimated that there are somewhere in the region of 27 million people in slavery today.²⁾

So how has human nature changed over the centuries? Has it changed for the better?

History

Surely it is essential that we have some knowledge of the ethnic backgrounds and the history of the people we attempt to work with. Very serious mistakes are made when we believe we can inflict our own political and socio-economic styles onto people from greatly different backgrounds.

During our conference we will have heard of different countries that are divided and no two stories will be the same, however similar.

I am here from Cyprus, The Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East. Unfortunately we do not have many indigenous Anglicans and certainly there are not any Cypriot Anglican Churches, although there are Cypriot Anglican priests serving in Britain and no doubt in other countries.

The Orthodox Church of Cyprus claims to have membership from 95% of the population, whether this is an accurate figure or not I can say that the Church is well supported and very well attended, with many magnificent buildings being erected at this time.

The Armenian Church, The Maronites and the Roman Catholic Church, known on the Island as the Latins, are all officially recognised by the State. At the time of Independence it was recognised that these three churches had indigenous congregations and do in fact have political representation. Other Churches including the Anglicans are well treated by the both the State and the Orthodox Church

2) www.notforsalecampaign.org

In preparation for this meeting I have spoken with a number of senior clergy from the mainline churches on the island and I have noted their comments on a separate sheet.

On the Island of Cyprus we are privileged to live in a country where Paul and Barnabas lived for a short time, where they taught, talked and walked. Before we hear of the happenings of St. Paul we hear of the Island of Cyprus in the Book of Acts³⁾ and of the people who escaped there after the persecution of Stephen and also of others who went to Antioch and proclaimed the message to the gentiles

In Acts 13⁴⁾, we hear of Paul and Barnabas arriving at the ancient capital of Cyprus, Salamis and walking right across the Island to Paphos

Over the centuries people from many different countries have lived on the island of Cyprus some as conquerors some as refugees until this day when the Island plays host to a great ethnic and cultural mix. From the early days many of the visitors remained and so there is a wonderful blend of Mediterranean and Arabic influences. The Census of 1931⁵⁾ indicated that the numbers of the Greek and Turkish residents were, 249,376 (80.3%) Greek and 61,339 (19.7) Turkish, the percentages population and percentages for 1970 were⁶⁾, 518,617 (81.9 %) Greeks and 114,383 (18.1) Turkish.

The Island has been ruled by different nations for many years and finally achieved its Independence from British rule on the 16th of August 1960.

Sadly differences between the Greek and Turkish populations and other political considerations finally led to what is known as the Invasion in the South and the Occupation in the North on the 20th of July 1974. After much talk and two Geneva Conferences the Turkish army once more began operations in Cyprus and in effect partitioned the Island in two, on the 14th of August 1974. This is the situation that remains today.

3) Acts 11: 19-21

4) Acts 13: 4-13

5) Report of the census of 1931 prepared by C. H. Hart-Davis, Nicosia, 1932

6) Demographic Report for the year 1970, Department of statistics and Research, Nicosia

It is with great sadness that I report to this Conference that whilst there have been many attempts to re-unite the Island, so far there has been little success.

I have briefly set the scene for you and apologise if for some I have gone at great length, but it is crucial, I believe, to have a brief knowledge of the background of this sad divide before one can begin to start talking about what can be done to bring about reconciliation between the two parties in Cyprus. It is easy to go on at length to discuss what this or that major nation should or should not have done.

Today

I wish to ask, as I am sure we all do, what can we do?

How do we bring about peace to a divided nation?

I live and work with people of differing persuasions, those who support the Greek and those who support the Turkish point of view. I am a great believer that if there is to be any reconciliation it must begin with the person on the street just as much as it must begin with the politicians but I have to tell you that many of the people I associate with appear to have no acceptance of the other in their hearts. In my own family I have a brother who has a home in the north of Cyprus and who served in the British Royal Air Force in Cyprus in the early 1960's. He saw the atrocities of fighting between the Greeks and Cypriots and wishes to have nothing to do with the Greeks. I live in the south of the Island and regularly hear the other side of the argument.

As we are to discuss this topic in small groups let me put forward a thought that you may find interesting to discuss.

In 2004 a referendum took place across the Island asking the question, should the Island unite following the UN plan of Kofi Annan

The North of Cyprus is Turkish controlled, Turkey claims to be a secular society yet to this day persecutes Christians and the North of Cyprus gives the appearance of

being Moslem, voted 'Yes' to re-unification.

Yet a Senior Churchman, living in the South, away from his area in the North claimed that anyone who voted 'Yes' would go to Hell⁷⁾. Southern Cyprus claims to be deeply Christian! The South voted 'No'.

I must add that another Senior Churchman said that the Church was 'not preaching tolerance⁸⁾'

We are living 33 years after this separation yet what I have just told you happened only three years ago. Constant efforts are made to bring the two sides together, to date none have been successful.

Many properties are falling apart in the North and South of the Island because they belong to people who became refugees leaving their homes and starting life anew in the opposite part of the island or moving from the Island completely. Whilst many properties have been left untouched and are now beginning to crumble, there are now considerable problems both in the North and South as to who land belongs and court cases are beginning to take place to establish rightful ownership.

Yet there have been wonderful stories from both North and South where people who moved into the houses of others have saved precious photographs. They were able to return them to the original owners when the border crossings became easier a few years ago and people were able to go and look at their old homes

In the South there are still posters around the country with pictures of loved ones who disappeared all those years ago. Trees decorate public squares and ribbons and photographs are tied to them in memory of missing loved ones

The Churches do not do a great deal together with organisations from the North, but services are allowed and only recently an approach was made from a local authority offering a place to worship to a local group.

7) Local Cypriot press April 2004

8) Cyprus Mail, Friday 24th April 2004

Youth organisations and groups of different types are making slow progress of working together.

Towards the Future

So what of the future:

In Cyprus, Schools are once again teaching children from the North and the South in the same classroom (not always easy)

Youth organisations are using their International foundations to meet together across borders, enabling young people to meet for the first time 'those from the other side'

One of the greatest 'barrier breakers' as is often the case appears to be music. Students cross borders to learn from qualified teachers, musicians play and choristers sing with 'people from across the border'

Within the Anglican Churches we are caring for refugees, immigrant workers, overseas students and where possible aiding the poor in both the North and the South

Where ever I look, who ever I listen to, I find people who have their difficulties. Difficulties and difference of opinion with people of other nations, other lands and other ethnic backgrounds. Yet it is with the people on the street that I truly believe we have to begin, whether they are members of a faith community or not.

But we are Christians and we have to look at what we are taught.

We need to look at the calling we are given by our Lord Jesus Christ to love one another – how can we in Cyprus and people in other countries all around the world, show that love and make a difference to the lives of others and peace within the world?

In Marks Gospel we are commanded 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength'⁹⁾

Do we believe in Christ? If the answer to this question is yes then we know what to do, we are told in the reading from St. Mark

In the Gospel of St. Luke we hear 'If you love only the people who love you, why should you receive a blessing?'¹⁰⁾ Can we really do this, have we got the faith, have we got enough love for our Lord to do this, pray without ceasing that you will be given the strength you need

At the end of this passage we hear the words: 'Love your enemies and do good to them'.

Let us pray with all our hearts that we may be able to carry out this command and that through the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit we may find a way to enable others to respond positively to the command.

9) St. Mark 12: 31

10) St. Luke 6: 32