

Over the years, Rachel and I have enjoyed going to the theatre. Occasionally you go to a play that really sticks in your memory, that really gets you thinking. It is one of those plays that you want to go back to. Such a play is ‘Quietly’. It is set in a bar in Nationalist Belfast after the paramilitary ceasefires. There are three characters, a Polish barman, Jimmy, a nationalist living in the area and Ian, a former Loyalist terrorist. The play opens with the Polish barman alone in the bar watching a football match between Poland and Northern Ireland. Jimmy walks in, orders his pint and says he is waiting for someone. The action begins with an amazing act of violence. As Ian walks in, Jimmy gets up, walks across and head butts Ian and goes back to his seat. As the story unfolds, it transpires that 25 years earlier Jimmy’s Dad had been killed in the same bar, with five others watching a football match between Poland and West Germany. Ian, then 16, the same age as Jimmy, had been the one who had thrown the bomb into the pub.

In a tension filled exchange, Jimmy is initially dismissive of Ian’s motives for coming, demanding have you discovered you’ve got cancer and you’re worried about hell. He tells of the pain inflicted on him and his mother by the brutal events that robbed them of his father who was just sitting with friends watching a football match. Of his own loss of an education, being forced to leave school at 16 to support his mother – his father’s hopes for him had been a university education that would open up opportunities he never had. We hear hatred, pain and contempt. Little by little he begins to let Ian tell his story, of a community dominated by men of violence who seduce young men, gradually drawing them in – first deliver a message, then hide a gun, then throw a bomb. We hear of a mother who is so ashamed of Ian she cannot bear to visit him in prison. We

hear of a realisation of a life that has been destroyed, there is no way he can make amends for what he has done. Jimmy still speaks of the pain that was inflicted on him. Then, when both have said all that they have to say, Ian prepares to go. He goes across to Jimmy with hand outstretched – there is a pause as we wonder will he take it or not – and finally he does. And as Ian moves away he says ‘And don’t come back here again.’

The action of the play is book ended by the act of violence at the outset and the tentative handshake. You cannot say that there is reconciliation but there is a beginning of communication, a beginning of understanding. It is almost as if a door has been unlocked and is just starting to open.

It is this image of a door being unlocked that I want to keep in mind as we go on to reflect on our Gospel reading.

This morning, in our second lesson from St John’s Gospel we have John’s account of the two meetings of the risen Christ with his disciples, one week apart. At one meeting Thomas is absent, the second he is there. I have a great affinity for Thomas and would often on this Sunday focus on him. This morning though, I want to focus on the first part of our lesson, that first meeting with the disciples – the locked doors, the risen Jesus breathing on his disciples, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’. Then those strange troubling, yet inspiring words:

If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

Those words have often, all too often, been interpreted by the Church in terms of power – power to include, power to exclude from fellowship, from communion.

Lets just go back to the locked doors.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear

The Greek of the original text is very strong - κλεισμένων - the use of the perfect tense implies the doors were locked permanently, irrevocably. It was not just the physical doors of the upper room that were locked that evening. There were other doors, just as impenetrable – doors of fears, of regrets, of hopelessness. What were they to do? Where were they to go?

Then suddenly Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” The doors were breached – not just the wooden doors of that room but the doors of their fears and their hopelessness, they too begin to give as he shows them his hands and his side, marks of death and humiliation two days before, now shown as signs of life, of love. Then the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Then in an image reminiscent of the Creation story, as God breathed the breath of life into the form of Adam, so the risen Lord breathes new life upon disciples shattered and broken by their memories of pain, of failure. There is an element here of unlocking of all sorts of doors, doors behind which the disciples hide, doors behind which they are trapped.

It is with this idea of unlocking of doors, that I want to go on to think about those words:

If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

alongside that tentative handshake at the end of the play. At the outset Jimmy's sole desire was to inflict pain. The doors, the barriers of creed, of culture, of hate that divided them were irrevocably closed. One senses that as the play progresses that his anger ensnares him just as much as it does Ian. In taking the extended hand of his father's killer he begins to take control, previously impenetrable barriers begin to ease open.

There is something deeply debilitating about unresolved conflict, about cycles of recrimination. In the course of the Northern Ireland conflict there were a series of 'tit for tat' killings in which innocent people on one side were killed to avenge the killing of someone on the other side. But there were those other occasions, such as the action of Gordon Wilson after the death of his daughter in the Remembrance Day bomb in Enniskillen, when people deliberately chose to break that cycle.

So I have come to see those words of Jesus:

If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

not so much in terms of authority given to grant or withhold forgiveness but rather as a simple statement of how things are – if I choose to forgive or not to forgive – if I choose to break the cycle or let hurt and resentment continue.

In that light, Jesus is inviting us to unlock doors – to unlock doors of

resentment, of regret, of prejudice – to enable new beginnings. In Christ, in death and resurrection, God makes new beginning in us. He invites us, he empowers us to be agents of his healing, reconciling, door opening love in the world in which we live and move and have our being.