

Conflict and Peace

On vacation Lucy and I drove quite a lot on strange roads and highways. Several times the same thing happened. Suddenly a junction appeared earlier than expected. There were signs about which city is in what direction but they arrived too fast to read and react to. So we pulled over and discussed. Over the years we have learned to edit out, "Why didn't you go left!!!" and "Why didn't you tell me to go left!!!" and the other unhelpful things that can get said. But there is still the tension about a decision that must be made if we are to get where we want to go.

The Spiritual Path is just like the roadway, as the name implies. It is a journey, it involves junctions, choices, decisions. And all of these are difficult and likely to involve conflict.

Conflict is the theme of today's readings.

God is in conflict with the people. He may be wishing he hadn't chosen this people. God expected justice, but instead saw bloodshed. He looked for righteousness and instead heard a cry. God is about to "un-friend" Isreal. (Is,5:7)

The Hebrews reading describes a series of horrible things happening to people on their way to peace with God. (Heb11;29-12;2)

Jesus says he has come to bring fire, family divisions and conflict. He chastises people for not seeing problems coming. (Lk 12:49-56)

It was somewhere outside of Moncton, as we were driving along peacefully listening to the radio that we suddenly realized we had been on the wrong road for quite a while. How did we know? Well, it kept offering turn-offs to places that seemed to be oddly unfamiliar. The river was on the wrong side. The sun seemed in the wrong place. We pulled over. We needed to find out what was what.

Where do you experience conflict in your life? Is it in your family? Is it in your church?
Your place of work? Your neighbourhood?

I was sitting in Starbucks at Kennedy Commons with someone and I wondered how I would feel if they changed the tables for something very different. Would I be upset? Would I write angry letters to the management? No, I thought. Frankly I don't care. If they did something I really didn't like I would just go somewhere else, and not fret.

So you only get into conflict about things that matter to you, things you care about, and with people you love.

"Conflict isn't a sign of the end of a relationship, it is an invitation to deepen the relationship." My old Spiritual Director once said to me years ago.

Conflict matters. It is a sign of importance. It tells you, like pain in your body tells you, "Something is wrong! Pay attention! Stop! Find out what is what!"

So outside Moncton we opened the map, and switched on the GPS. Alone we could not find out what was amiss. We could have asked someone, or we could turn to other information. We needed a bigger picture. We needed to get our bearings. And as soon as we did that the emotional temperature in the car began to go down, and that was nice.

You know when a relationship is going off course. You begin to notice the signs, you begin to feel the sense of a wrong direction, unwelcome things show up, tension grows and a sense of foreboding mounts.

So what do you do? The spiritual journey teaching of Jesus is oddly in the word "Repent". Most people do not know that repent, in Greek *metanoia*, means "Stop and turn around". It is a directional word. It doesn't mean grovel, or be sad, or anything negative. It means "Re-find your direction."

Jesus says repeatedly. "Repent, and believe the Good News."

In the Moncton area that good news is that there were connecting roads that would get us back on track. And prior to that the good news was that there were accurate maps provided by the Province of New Brunswick, and that the GPS was working. We were not alone in a wilderness without hope. We had "back up".

In the Spiritual Journey understanding of life when you find yourself in conflict our Faith teaches us first to stop.

Stop. Pay attention. Look around.

Ask yourself to notice what is wrong? How it feels? Where it comes from? How long has this been happening? Who or what is involved? How did we get here?

Then our Faith teaches us to believe we have good news waiting to be revealed to us. God is good. God will not leave us in the wilderness. There is back-up. You have church friends, and clergy to check in with. There is the Bible to turn to. Ask yourself, what bit of the Bible stories comes to mind when I think about this? Turn to it, look at it, pray with it. Ask God, in prayer, to show you the right way back.

On the roads around Moncton part of the turning around was for me to admit that I had failed to notice several large signs. I had been quietly singing along with the tunes, and thinking other thoughts. I had not been paying attention.

The first part of turning around, "repenting", is often about looking first at what you did to contribute to the mess, or didn't do to slow it down. Conflict builds because we chose to be distracted from it. *Hamartia*, the word for "sin" actually also defines a bad shot with an arrow. You failed to get the arrow far enough to hit the target, or you shot off the right line. Attention and effort. "Sin" is a lack of attention and effort. If you are going to get out of a mess you need to pay a lot more attention and put in a lot of effort.

So Lucy and I pored over the map, consulted the GPS, and thought about lunch. We made a plan, and we turned off the radio while we paid attention to the turns we needed to get right and we got back to the right road and stopped for food and drink.

Conflict in relationship is not, sadly, so quickly healed. But the principles of it are the same.

Notice that Jesus does not say conflict is bad. In fact he says he will send it into your life, right into the heart of your family even. Jesus will not anaesthetize your life, but will send you pain signals when you are getting lost on the Spiritual Journey of life. They are gifts. They are not gifts to be rejoiced over, but gifts to be thankful for because they are guiding you back to the place of peace and joy which is your birthright in Baptism.

To grow is to change. To be perfect is to have changed often. Change is initiated by conflict and pain. PAY ATTENTION.