

St Paul said:

“Do conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

On April 4th 1968 Martin Luther King was assassinated. He was a man of eloquence, courage, conviction and non-conformity. The day before he died he said this:

“I’ve been to the mountain top; and I have looked over and I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Martin Luther King – the champion fighter for the black community in America from the late 1950’s on- epitomises St Paul’s call to those who call themselves Christian: not to conform with the ways of the world, tolerating injustice and oppression, but to be people of conviction.

I will always remember the words of his six year old daughter when she asked:

“Daddy, why are you so often put in prison?”

“Do conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

“Do not conform” say St Paul and what challenging these words are in an age where so many pressures have unconsciously conditioned our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo.

Yet in spite of this prevailing tendency to conform we these words of St Paul calling us to journey of non-conformity, of moral nobility not social respectability.

In short, we are called to live differently and according to a higher loyalty.

When Rome wanted to colonise a new province, she established a small colony of Romans to live in that province according to Roman Law and Roman customs and who, although in a foreign land, held fast to their Roman allegiance.

This powerful, creative minority spread the gospel of Roman culture. And although this analogy is imperfect as Roman settlers lived within a framework of injustice and exploitation, they were, in this sense, non-conformists.

And Paul speaks of our responsibility to imbue our society with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, as Christians we should never surrender our loyalty to any time bound custom, or earth bound idea for at the heart of our universe is a higher reality- God and his Kingdom of love- to which we must be conformed.

St Paul is clearly picking up the non-conformity of much of Jesus' teaching:

- For when our affluent society would coax us to believe that happiness is wedded to the cars we drive, the homes we own, the things we own, Jesus says "A persons life consists not in the abundance of the things he possesses."
- When it's easier to turn a blind eye to injustice and choose the path of comfort rather than conviction, we hear Jesus say: "Blessed are they who are persecuted for what is right, for theirs is the Kingdom of God."
- And whenever we become complacent about our faith and think that we have "arrived" in terms of our spirituality Jesus warns that "The publicans and harlots go into the Kingdom before you."
- And when we, through compassionless detachment we fail to respond to the needs of the underprivileged Jesus whispers "in as much as you have done it for the least of these, you have done it for me." And that includes being with the imprisoned, sick and hungry.
- And when ever we allow the spark of revenge to flame into hatred, Jesus teaches: "Love your enemies."

Jesus' non-conformity exposes our often stale conformity, conformity that can be seen in church history where again and again she failed to challenge:

Slavery

a partite

economic exploitation

sexual abuse

Many examples can be cited where at best the church has remained silent and at worst actually condoned injustice.

Called to be moral guardians of the community, the church has at times preserved that which is unethical.

Called to combat social evils, it has remained silent behind stained glass windows.

We need to recapture the Gospel glow of the early church, who were non-conformist in the true sense of the word and who refused to shape their witness according to the wisdom of the world. And after all that suffering and sacrifice they captured the Roman empire for Jesus Christ.

How much do we need to share the Gospel in our world today. I believe that the only hope for a secure and liveable world lies with disciplined non-conformists who are dedicated to living out the commandments of Jesus- dedicated to

Justice

Love

Peace

As Emerson wrote (in his essay "self reliance")

"Who would be a man (or woman) must be a non conformist."

But hang on. We need to be careful here. St Paul doesn't say to us to simply be non-conformist. He says that we should allow our lives to be transformed so that our non-conformity might become a creative force for good.

When we experience this transformation we then gain strength and courage to confront all the evils we see around us.

Our world teeters on the brink of disaster- dangerous passions of hatred, fanaticism and selfishness.

Our own land also teeters on the brink of moral meltdown where self adsorption threatens the social fabric.

The saving of our communities and our land and our world I believe is not to be found through might of army nor through political will but through you and me. How?

We say

I'm too old

I'm too young

I'm not clever enough

I'm too busy

These arguments do not stand the examination of scripture. For no where do we find any restrictions placed by St Paul on God's transforming Spirit.

It does not say be transformed...unless you are a school, kid or a pensioner..."

Who ever we are, young, old, bright or not God wants to transform us all by his renewing Spirit.

As Luther King declared:

"We must make a choice; will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity or will we listen to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds. Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soul-saving music of eternity. More than ever before we are today challenged by Paul's words of yesterday."

He's right and it has to begin a new in every generation, where men and women of faith respond to the challenges of our day. And we do so with sincerity. Every generations have challenges unique to that era as well as issues carried over from previous generations.

This generation faces the war on terror and the religious hatred that sees men and women as suicide bombers. We have a Nations split over us of our young men and women in Iraq and the shocking images of abuse of prisoners that destroys any sense of moral justness in the cause to free the oppressive and abused in America.

We face a society that has lost it's Christian moral framework that manifests itself in record levels of imprisoned; in drug abuse etc etc.

We are called to be transformed and with sincerity live and move as light in darkness and as the salt of the earth.

We sign our letters often with the closing words...

“Yours sincerely”

The word sincere come from the Latin SINCERUS meaning to be pure, real, genuine and true.

But what is interesting is the theory that sincerus had its origin in two Latin words SINE and CERA which means without wax.

In ancient Rome one item of furniture that was highly praised was the dining table. Sometimes furniture makers could find boards large enough to make a table top all in one piece, without any patching.

But sometimes the craftsmen would fit tow pieces of wood together, often with such skill that a perfect fit was made.

However, poorer craftsmen would find they ended up with a crack or gap the whole length of the table and would disguise this shoddy workmanship by rubbing wax into the gap.

This was unnoticeable - until a hot pot was placed on the table. Not surprisingly a law was passed to stop this and there was issued a certificate to all genuine pieces of furniture SINE CERA...without wax.

So to be sincere could mean to be genuine, honest pure.

And if Paul urges us to be sincere in our living, he also means we must be without wax.

There's too much plastering over the cracks in today's world. In the long term these faults become exposed.

For an real relationship – either with God, within our families and in our communities – must be without wax or else we have only a second rate relationship.

In terms of our faith journey it too must be without wax.

My prayer is that we, each of us, may be transformed, sincere nonconformists so that we, as Paul concluded,

“We may prove what is the will of God, what is good acceptable and perfect.”

And to steal a phrase from Luther King:

I have a dreamthat we may all be without wax and live our lives never underestimating the power of a little yeast in the dough.”