

# Sunday 28 May 2006: The Seventh Sunday after Easter

## World Communications Day

### Reading: John 17: 6-19

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today is the 40<sup>th</sup> annual 'World Communications Day', but sitting in an Anglican Church you can be forgiven for, perhaps, not having heard of it. For it was established by the Roman Catholic Church at the end of the momentous Second Vatican Council held in the 1960s. Its purpose was to underline the importance of communication in human society, in the mission of the church, and to acknowledge the workers in communications industries. And of course, without any hint of vested interest, I would like to see the wider church mark this day. So I am grateful to St Martin's for giving me this opportunity to do so.

There are many opinion polls and surveys carried out in order to discover which professions are the most trusted, and also the least trusted. It will come as no surprise that at the bottom of the trusted league are politicians, closely followed by journalists and the media. (But lest some people around here get too smug, in one online survey conducted by the Scottish *Sunday Herald* newspaper, the third least trusted profession were Clergy.)

Perhaps that degree of disdain for the media in general, and journalists in particular, is why, in over four decades or so of church attendance I can only recall three times when journalists have been the subject of the congregation's prayers. Once was quite recently following a sermon I had been invited to preach about journalism. For the second memory I have to go back more than a decade and a half when prayers were said for John McCarthy during his imprisonment as a hostage in the Lebanon. And the third time you'll be pleased to know was here in St Martin's last Thursday during the Radio Four Ascension Day service. Given that intercessions are a good indicator of a congregation's concerns, such lack of concern, in itself should be of concern. Why? Because good journalism is vital for a free society.

While the UK has the luxury of a relatively free press many societies do not. Let me just take the case of Ethiopia. Today, 76 people are on trial on treason charges, with another 25 being tried in their absence. Those on trial, and possibly facing a death sentence, include elected politicians and fourteen journalists. I have been three times to Ethiopia, providing consultancy and journalism training for the *Addis Broadcasting Company* who had hoped to set up the first non-government, independent radio station. They also set up the *Addis Zena* newspaper. People I have worked with are among those on trial, including, Berhanu Nega, a founder of *ABC* and *Addis Zena*, and the mayor-elect of Addis Ababa the Ethiopian capital. What they seek is nothing less than we take for granted – open political debate. If the judicial criteria for their arrest were applied here by our government, most journalists and opposition politicians would be in jail (and probably many Labour back-bench MPs as well).

Those of us who read, listen to or watch the product of good journalism are indebted to the dedication which journalists bring to their tasks. Good journalism is one that is faithful to its core value: the pursuit of truth. For many journalists that means working with a passion to provide good, accurate and reliable information to the wider community. Its active premise is that societies and individuals should have the possibility to use that information responsibly to

create good community. As those imprisoned Ethiopian journalists and politicians could surely testify – if they had the opportunity – the quest to find the stories that matter is a perilous enterprise. Yet they do it to allow us all the liberty to participate more fully in the great social conversations. Why else would they struggle against repressive authority in one place, struggle to unearth the secret deceptions in another, or brave the bloody battle fronts to bear independent witness to the consequences of war?

Now to be sure the vast majority of journalists are not putting their necks on the line every day, and I'm quite sure a number in the profession have little regard for journalism's core values. Nevertheless, the journalistic enterprise is a worthy one – at best always undertaken in service of the reader, listener or viewer. In the common cause of human rights and personal liberty. Journalists, whether imprisoned or not, deserve the supportive prayers of the faith communities; and I might add, people persecuted for their religious faith deserve the attention of journalists.

Free societies are built on the old truth that intellectual, religious, and press freedoms are inextricably linked - and are vital for individual and community liberties to flourish. So both the faith communities and news media have a proper vested interest in ensuring each others freedoms are jealously guarded. Such freedoms don't exist for their own sake, but for the building of open communities.

Back in 1984 the Indian economist, Amartya Sen, won the Nobel Prize for economics for his work in establishing that there were no famines in countries where democracies exist (even in Africa). Arguably, an important element of his case is often overlooked – societies need democratic space and public opinion to flourish, and that requires a free and independent media. The development of a strong, vibrant, diverse, responsible and free independent media is crucial to the development and sustaining of open democratic societies. This reinforces the basic understanding of what human communication is for - the building of community. And media are an important part of community relationships, part of our social conversation.

Now in today's Gospel reading, Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples, but with a passion for 'truth' – that the disciples might be sanctified by 'truth'. Jesus lived to reveal a universal truth of God's liberating love and justice for all humankind, for each and every person, for you and for me. This passion for truth characterised Jesus' ministry: and Christians value Christ's words 'the truth will set you free' – a phrase which resonates with the multi-layered nature of 'truth'. It encompasses the supreme truth about Christ's testimony to the love of God for all people, through to the elementary truths in everyday conversation. All truth is God's truth. Yet the tragic irony is that while 'truth' is liberating, is the foundation of freedom, at the same time the pursuit of truth can lead to its opposite: imprisonment, other forms of persecution, even death on the cross. Some journalists end up in jail because of their commitment to reveal important matters that power and authorities want kept hidden. Yet the very task which endangers a reporter's liberty can be the revelation of truths which are necessary for a community's liberty: truths that can assist the development of open societies and the possibility of good governance.

Communication is at the core of human society, at the very heart of human relationships. People communicate to build community - building in physical, moral, and spiritual terms, with those of like faith and values, and with those of neither. We do it in two and threes, as well as in larger social groups, and in international relations. And I believe that the end that Christians seek, echoing the deepest longings of every human heart, is that via the building of

community, we may find communion - that very deep, intimate, and mutual sharing of values and concerns between all peoples, and with God the Creator of the Universe.

The human inclination to communicate is an expression of that imperative. Notwithstanding the undoubted capacity for people to use communication manipulatively, to provoke ruin, and to destroy relationships; it should be recognised that all communication, whether through letters, phone calls, or broadcasters and newspapers, is in some way (however inadequate) an expression of that scheme of things: the dynamic relation of communication, community and communion.

What we do here today in this Eucharist, is not just for ourselves as each of us goes forward to communicate, neither is it just about the internal community activity of the Church. Every time we celebrate communion, we affirm the pattern, the model, for the whole of humankind - that all communication should be for the building of community in love, peace and justice which then establishes true intimate communion. This Eucharist reminds us that all of humankind, every single person, was and is created in the image of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit – a three-person community in perfect communion.

**Amen.**