

JUSTICE – SOME REFLECTIONS (MERCY CENTRE, MARCH 2017)

*somewhere and some time
a cat and a mouse
used to eat from the one bowl*

*it would have happened until today
if the cat had not been told
that mice are edible*

If you were asked to put a title on that piece, what would you say?

- EQUALITY (INEQUALITY)
- INFLUENCE
- FOOD FOR THOUGHT
- EDEN
- SOUL FOOD

- EDUCATION
- A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE IS A DANGEROUS THING

- If the cat had not been TOLD that mice are edible
- TOLD –
- TAUGHT
- EDUCATION –
- If the cat had not been TOLD that mice are edible
- IF the child had not been told that FLOWERS ARE RED / AND GREEN LEAVES ARE GREEN

SONG – HARRY CHAPIN

- FLOWERS ARE RED / AND GREEN LEAVES ARE GREEN
- *There's no need to see flowers any other way
Than they way they always have been seen*
- THE WAY THEY ALWAYS HAVE BEEN SEEN
- Harry Chapin's song is very simple; it's also very powerful
- Because it addresses the vexed issue of NATURE / CULTURE
- As Paulo Friere, author of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, put it:
- The first step towards critical awareness is to appreciate the distinction between
 - the world of nature (which is unalterable)

- and the world of culture (which is a social construction and thereby alterable)
- The teacher kills the boy's imagination and curiosity because she crushes that distinction between NATURE & CULTURE
- For her there is none
- NATURE IS WHAT MATTERS – NATURE IS UNALTERABLE
 - CULTURE, ART ETC ARE IRRELEVANT, FRIVOLOUS, INSIGNIFICANT
- NATURE TAKES PRECEDENCE
- IT REPRESENTS THE WAY THINGS 'SHOULD BE DONE'
- THE WAY THINGS SHOULD BE SEEN
 - *THERE'S NO NEED TO SEE FLOWERS ANY OTHER WAY / THAN THE WAY THEY ALWAYS HAVE BEEN SEEN"*
- Ah yes, PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED, as Friere famously called it – education which kills imagination, curiosity, independent thinking, critical awareness –
- Education which oversimplifies reality
- Which CLOSES THE MIND rather than OPENS IT
- Which frames, if not narrows, our perception of REALITY
- WHY?
- FOR OUR OWN GOOD
- In the words of the song:
- The teacher put him in a corner
She said, "It's for your own good
And you won't come out 'til you get it right
And are responding like you should"
- Yes, there's the rub – the unkindest cut of all - It's for 'your own good'.
- It's NATURAL – it's the way things are or the way they always have been seen.
- FLOWERS ARE RED.
- Only think about it.
- Substitute GOD IS MALE, for FLOWERS ARE RED, and Harry Chapin's song gets really interesting (theologically speaking at least).
- For, as one female theologian expressed it, if GOD IS MALE, THEN THE MALE IS GOD.
- *A man and a woman used to eat from the one bowl. It would have happened until today if the man had not been told that woman are inferior.*
- A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.
- But the phrase FLOWERS ARE RED has resonance in lots of different contexts.
- Where I work, in Age and Opportunity, the song might read something like this:
- FLOWERS ARE RED – *OLD PEOPLE ARE FRAIL*
- FLOWERS ARE RED – *OLD PEOPLE ARE SENILE*
- FLOWERS ARE RED – *OLD PEOPLE ARE DEPENDENT*
- As Anna Karpf expressed it:

- The denigration of age is built upon the idealisation of youth, and both do violence to reality.
- That's an interesting phrase – do 'violence to reality'.
- The insistence that FLOWERS ARE RED does violence to reality.
- In Brendan Kennelly's words, it reveals the kind of FANATICISM which he associates with a CLOSED MIND.
- As he put it -
 - The closed mind oversimplifies reality in such a way that self-doubt is as unthinkable as a deep tolerance of the rights of others. The closed mind leads to fanaticism.
 - A fanatic is a terrorist who is himself terrified of alternatives.
 - A fanatic is a person who can see only one point of view, and who sincerely believes that most other points of view are not merely wrong but have to be exterminated. Sometimes fanatics are very quiet, and enjoy prominent positions.
 - A fanatic will always try to bend reality to his own design in different ways. He will work with unrelenting energy and dedication to achieve this. He is strong and sincere.
 - He may well be incapable of insincerity and he has an even more powerful weapon to aid him in his noble task – he has a closed mind, a truly terrifying weapon.' (Brendan Kennelly, cited in *Culture in Ireland: Division or Diversity* (1991), p. 21-22)
- The closed mind is a terrifying weapon. In what sense?
- Go back to the song. What happens to the boy?
- *'Well finally he got lonely
Frightened thoughts filled his head
And he went up to the teacher
And this is what he said*

- *And he said
'Flowers are red, and green leaves are green
There's no need to see flowers any other way
Than the way they always have been seen'*

- POIGNANT.
- A case of internalised oppression you might say.

- The song therefore has much to say about the CLOSED MIND and how it operates, how it seeks to influence others 'for their own good.'
- It also has something to say about those
 - *Who cease to think for themselves*
 - *Who accept the stereotypes or toe the party line*
 - *Who insist on seeing only one point of view*
 - *Who bend reality to their own design*
 - *Who avoid discriminating between the world of nature and the world of culture*
- In Kennelly's terms, the CLOSED MIND is indeed a terrifying WEAPON
 - One used to INFLICT a worldview on others

- Or an OVERSIMPLIFIED VIEW OF REALITY on others.
- This, I suggest, is a pretty common FORM OF INJUSTICE.
- The older I get, the more I begin to see that we are all fanatics in some sense – because we identify with our own ideas, and become quite attached to the stories we tell ourselves in our head.
- We are particularly attached to ideas about things, about ‘THE WAY THINGS ARE’ and ‘THE WAY THINGS SHOULD BE’.
- We’re not called creatures of habit for nothing.
- We are also especially attached to our ideas about people.....
- Last Sunday, hearing the parable of the Prodigal Son, Helder Camara’s short piece sprung to mind:

I pray incessantly
for the conversion
of the prodigal son’s
brother.

Ever in my ear
rings the dread warning:
‘The one has awoken
from his life of sin.
When will the other
awaken from his virtue?’

- I’m beginning to wonder whether COMPASSION asks us, at some level, to ‘awaken from our virtue’,
- to stop passing judgment on people who let us down, who disappoint us, who don’t live up to our expectations.
- Compassion doesn’t sit easily with a closed mind.
- It reminds us that, where people are concerned, we must try and be open to surprise, to change, to a sense of alternative possibility.
- Back to the song:
- ‘There are so many colors in the rainbow
So many colors in the morning sun
So many colors in the flower and I see every one’.
- A closed mind is blind to ‘many colours’.
- It much prefers to see things in black n’ white.
- It doesn’t like nuance, complexity, ambiguity, contradiction.
- It much prefers certainty, pronouncement, predictability.
- It loves to play God and pass judgment, ‘Typical; that’s typical’.
- Why?
- Because it firmly believes that
- ‘There’s no need to see people any other way / than the way they always have been seen’.

- This closed-ness, narrowness, bigotry, I suggest, is a pretty common form of injustice.
- When it comes to the mind, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.