

Belonging

I have been thinking recently about confirmation. This is a ceremony, which acknowledges and establishes in public your adult membership of the church and of the wider Christian community. Confirmation is in many ways all we have left in Western Culture of initiation ceremonies marking the transition from childhood and dependence to the responsibilities of being a fully signed up adult member of the human race.

The social function of confirmation used to be noted in many more outward signs. I remember my grandfather telling me that as young kids they were not allowed to sit at the dinner table. Only after their confirmation were they considered sufficiently civilised to sit down and eat at the table, properly. As a child I thought this cruel, but the occasional lunch here has convinced me of the wisdom of this practice. Similarly Afrikaans boys in South Africa will only wear long trousers after their confirmation, before that it is shorts all the way, no matter what the weather. My sisters and I were still taught to curtsy every time we shook an adult's hand pre-confirmation, a habit, which caused us great embarrassment at highly public moments such as receiving prizes at school.

In Africa initiation ceremonies are still far more extensively practised. Nelson Mandela in his *Long walk to Freedom* gives a fairly detailed description of the ritual circumcision of his initiation at the age of 16, but I would like to read to you what he said about the few days that followed:

We lived in our two huts – thirteen in each – while our wounds healed. When outside the huts we were covered in blankets, for we were not allowed to be seen. It was a period of quietude, a kind of spiritual preparation for the trials of manhood that lay ahead.

Two phrases seem important here: *A kind of spiritual preparation for the trials of manhood* and *while we waited for our wounds to heal*. In practice those wounds often do not heal and both boys and girls risk death in undergoing these rituals. Shocking and barbaric!? I taught several children in Africa who willingly chose to take that risk, who looked forward to taking it and not in ignorance. And though I feared for them, I also admired them. Because there's a part of me that insists that this is not barbaric at all, but real: if this life is going to be worth living, its mysteries worth understanding – should we not be willing risk death to understand them – is our membership of the human race not perhaps

dependent on exactly such a willingness to face that risk in the only way it is possible to face it: alone.

There seems to be then a contradiction in these ceremonies of transition and in the process of growing up itself: on the one hand it involves becoming a member of a group and on the other there is an element of turning inward to discover something entirely individual - the start of a journey that is best undertaken alone.

Individuality and belonging. Why does this strike one as contradictory? Possibly because of the ways in which we see belonging; there are rules to belonging aren't there? You need to speak a certain language, in a certain way and with a certain accent and wear certain clothes in order to gain access to the group of your choice. Too often we hope in this way to achieve some kind of a sense of identity, some certainty of who we are and where we belong in the world.

Hopefully a sense of belonging under these circumstances will always, however, leave you feeling unsatisfied and with a strong desire to rebel against the conformity, the empty rules, to break free and find a truer self.

So where does that leave us then with this strange ritual coming up on Sunday? Is it an old contradiction to be taken upon oneself simply because, by the rules of this society, that's what we do at about this age? Should we be cynical about it and view it as an antiquated custom, which we endure 'cos we get presents and our family may take us out for the day, but otherwise it is only a long and dull ceremony?

Well, no. I think we need to examine more closely the non-social half of this contradiction – the spiritual preparation for the trials of adult life in the hope that then our sense of what it means to belong to this society will be the clearer. One of the most beautiful explorations of that journey of discovery is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. In it a small, middle-aged, entirely unheroic hobbit sets out with his gardener on a quest, which strangely enough is not to *find* something as is usual in quest stories but to *lose* something.

He is afraid of this task, he says to Gandalf; 'Of course I have sometimes thought of going away, but I have always imagined that as a kind of holiday, a series of adventures, . . . ending in peace. . . . But this would mean exile a flight from danger into danger, drawing it after me. And I suppose I must go alone . . . But I feel very small, and very uprooted and well – desperate' He has after all lived all his life in the Shire, where anyone who lives as far away as the next village is considered a stranger or at the very least a bit odd, either way not to be

trusted. It is a fragile belonging that is based on fear and mistrust and one he has not yet had the courage to challenge.

Possession of the Ring changes this, forces him radically out of his comfortable life. What is this thing then that he, on behalf of Middle Earth must lose, must destroy? This beautiful magical ring, which nearly everyone in Middle Earth both desires and fears. What is the power of the One Ring:

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them

In this Ring lies the power to assert your will over others – to manipulate, to get your own way, always, every time, invisibly. Who does not want that power? The ability to do this, to make parents or peers or pupils do what you want - the possession of the Ring - makes us feel invincible, immortal even. In this way it feeds all our most craven desires based on that ultimate fear: that we must die, that we are not immortal. That is why we all have the desire to preserve something of ourselves (in art or poetry or worst of all, in politics). Because we must die: we all wish at least once to force the world to take note of us - to do our bidding.

But what is the price of such power? It cuts you off from the rest of the world which is both visible and mortal and you will find yourself desperately alone, standing at the very edge of doom as Frodo does and be unable to throw off the burden of the Ring. For to cut yourself off from the rest of humanity and lock your sense of who you are into your own being alone can only lead to despair and terrible loneliness. We see this with heartbreaking clarity in Gollum, who is the Ring's unhappy slave.

And the only possible answer to the despair of discovering that you are stuck inside your skin with no hope of ever getting out, is friendship, is companionship, is love based on compassion for others who are similarly lonely; who feel that same despair. And those others are all members of the human race.

Humanity is not a group of choice, our membership here is inevitable, no matter how you look or dress or speak, so what becomes important is not the membership itself but how we live it. Do we live it in fear and mistrust or do we recognise ourselves even in that most miserable and undignified little creature, Gollum and turn to him with mercy. If we do, the quest can be completed, the Ring destroyed and the world saved. If we don't, the power of the Ring continues and fear will rule the world.

That is my understanding of some of Tolkien's wonderful book, that in order to live in the peace of the Shire we need to be prepared to lose it. We need to sacrifice our desire to make all the world in our own

image, we need to stop manipulating, stop trying to make the world be as we think it ought to be and simply step into relationship with it, wherever we find ourselves in it.

This is hard, because the human world is so often ugly and cruel, but if we recognise that so much of this stems from our essential loneliness and our desire to break out of it, then suddenly community is possible. Because when you have faced the isolation and darkness in yourself, you will find that you are able to turn, with sympathy, with love, to others, to strangers even, and still know that you belong. We do belong on this terribly ruined world, whether we like it or not, but there is help on offer, there are now and again times and places, like Rivendell and Lothlorien for Frodo, where we can rest:

Come to me all you who labour and are burdened, I will refresh you . . . and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11 verse 28)

The Eucharist which will be offered on Sunday, in bread and wine shared, is a moment of unity which opens this consolation to the new adults: that their belonging to the human race, that their humanity can be made bearable and is not, after all, an entirely lonely experience.

That like Frodo, they will not be asked to make this journey alone.