

Prayer and Action

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Recently I took part in a protest rally and march in Cathedral Square in Christchurch highlighting the over reaction of police in arresting some activist groups in New Zealand under the guise of terrorism laws. I was pushing a pram with one of our tamariki aboard and carrying a Catholic Worker sign saying, 'pray for peace.' A policeman came alongside at one stage and said, 'I agree with you, we certainly need to do that.'

I suddenly realised that during this peace and justice rally – for that indeed was what it was – this was the only sign that gave any recognition to the spiritual nature of what we were about. None of the speakers had raised the dimension of the spiritual underpinning of peace and justice and the desire we were expressing that the police also act in peaceful, non-intimidatory ways. The philosophy of non-violence was not mentioned. It was as if Te Whiti o Rongomai, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Buddha, Dorothy Day and Jesus never existed.

I was left reflecting on several things. The absence of any overt Church presence in any obvious way, even though the rally was held outside the Anglican Cathedral. We have certainly regressed a long way from the heady days of the Springbok tour protests 26 years ago when Christian and specifically Catholic voices were to be heard regularly in this marketplace addressing all sorts of social issues. That witness is no longer there. And the country is the poorer for it. I fear the Churches are no longer seen as credible partners in the struggle for justice and are simply perceived as places for private involvement. Many Catholics are left asking, are we in the process of privatising our faith, individualising it in line with the main thrust of the consumer ideology?

But I digress. The point the sign was making is that no lasting peace - or proper social change for that matter - can come about unless hearts and minds are changed. And that means an inward journey to strengthen the soul. If I have learnt something in 40 years of social activism I have learned a simple truth. Political action on its own is simply not enough. Political action not based in firm moral and spiritual soil is destined to wither and die. Where we separate out social struggle from prayer and moral principle, then we plant seeds that cannot endure.

Conversely, faith on its own is not enough. It wasn't enough in the time of the apostle James who wrote, 'A person obtains holiness by deeds and not by faith alone.' And the apostle John who wrote, 'Our love is not to be mere words or mere talk, but something real and active.' Just as successive popes have pointed out for more than 40 years that true peacemaking is rooted in justice, so like Siamese twins, prayer and action go together.

The struggle for peace and justice is one that belongs to everyone, not just so-called activists. Activists can be simply people who take the command of Jesus 'to love thy neighbour' more seriously than most. But this struggle can only succeed in a lasting way when its spiritual roots are recognised. It is through prayer, reflection and meditation that we come to recognise that the radical roots of social change lie buried deep within the hearts of people. It is only the spirit who can access our hearts. And it

is only when hearts change that injustice can be overcome and true peace and justice promoted sustainably in social and political structures.

This is a message that social activists need to consider. The world is littered with burnt out activists who didn't understand until it was too late that they were running their batteries low. And when they did realise that there was a problem, either didn't know or had forgotten how to recharge. They were too often left with the empty shell of unfulfilled hopes, tinged sometimes with bitter memories, of what originally had been wonderful ideals. Political groupings are very susceptible to this syndrome. For many it can take half a lifetime to recover from such disillusionment and wear-out.

Which leads me back to our police protest march and the sign, 'pray for peace'. It is important that protests, marches and vigils occur. They are a public witness to a particular justice cause. It is also important that varying actions for peace and justice be an integral part of the spiritual life of each person, and certainly anyone who professes Christ. But in order to sustain such action, it is important that it be rooted in prayer. Prayer is like a jug plugged into a divine socket and switched on. Once connected, little bubbles surface slowly. On occasions the bubbles become so powerful and dominating that they come to the surface and take over the whole jug. But because the water is never separated from the source in the socket, life is always bubbling just below the surface. It never goes away.

In the same way, divine life is always bubbling away just below our consciousness and never goes away. Occasionally, as we tap into it, it surfaces and takes over our lives in overt prayer forms. But most of the time the divine is present just below the surface. It is keeping it warm and ready to come to the boil that is the lot of daily prayer, reflection and meditation. And it is from such prayer that the challenge 'to love our neighbour' and be social justice advocates flows. In this sense, we are all called to be activists.