

Message from Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury

Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury

In our feverish and impatient world, it is an important part of our Christian witness that we should be reminding people that our humanity needs time to grow, needs the time in which selfawareness, repentance and renewal can flourish

*Message from the Archbishop of Canterbury
to the Prior and Community of the Monastery of Bose
and all attending the Seventeenth International Ecumenical Conference
on Orthodox Spirituality:*

SPIRITUAL STRUGGLE IN THE ORTHODOX TRADITION,
9-12 September 2009

I am very happy once again to send my blessings and best wishes as you gather at Bose to pray and reflect and to discuss what the great teachers of the spiritual life have called 'the art of arts' the disciplines and practices that shape us, by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

On this occasion, you will be focusing on the imagery of 'spiritual struggle'. From the very beginning of Christianity, as we see in the words and actions of Our Lord himself, there has been the conviction that human beings have been the object of a violent assault from the forces of spiritual evil, an assault that has left them disastrously weakened and less than free. The Lord comes with a gospel of absolute, nonviolent mercy and promise. Yet the effect of this gospel confronting the aggression of evil is a great conflict, played out in what the Western liturgy calls an 'astounding battle', *duellum mirandum*, a hand to hand struggle between death and life in the Paschal mystery, from which Christ emerges as conqueror. It is that Paschal struggle that now takes place in the depth of the hearts of all the baptised: we struggle, not for our own victory, but for the victory of Christ to be manifest in us.

For this to become real, we need at least two things. The first is a keen eye to diagnose the stratagems of the forces of destruction, the various subtle ways in which Christ's victory can be obscured or undermined in us by passions that cloud our understanding. We need to be able to see where our selforiented, selfserving habits ally themselves with the deeper currents of negation and rebellion that are at work in the universe, and to which we give the name of the diabolical. Secondly, we need, quite simply, perseverance the long vision that is able to see the defeats of yesterday and today as opportunities for penitence and learning, not for despair. And this is a patience born out of the confidence that the victory has truly been won already in the cross and resurrection of the Saviour. There is nothing passive about it. It is the habit of unflinching hope, grounded in the faithfulness of the God who continually 'is giving us the victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ' (I Cor. 15:57).

In the eyes of some people, this language is difficult. In the modern world, we are inclined to recoil from the vocabulary of warfare. In our own Church, certain hymns that use this imagery have become unfashionable in recent years. It is also hard for many to accept that the task of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a matter of a lifetime's labour, not the work of a moment and not simply the enjoyment of comforting religious feelings.

It is certainly true that the Church in the past has sometimes used the language that properly refers to spiritual struggle so as to give legitimacy to wars against nonChristians or to violence against heretics. And it is not surprising that in an age when we are more conscious than ever of the shame and tragedy of war, arid of the ruthlessness with which some can exploit the language of faith for violent ends, we should want to turn away from some of these images of battle, of armour and swords.

Yet the New Testament shows us how, when death and life encounter each other when the Kingdom of God, with its justice and peacefulness, appears in the midst of our everyday world what results is a real struggle, in which the forces of destruction are powerful and resourceful. We should not shrink from borrowing this paradoxical language of battle and warfare, while recognising that the conflict is one taking place not in the world of human power politics but in the heart, and that the victory is won when we, with our selfish desires and habits, surrender fully to Our Lord, not when we acquire power over others.

A great Anglican spiritual guide of the nineteenth century, Fr Richard Benson, gave to his commentary on the Psalms the

title, *The War Songs of the Prince of Peace*; and this sums up very eloquently the tension in the words and images we use. For the victory of Christ to become fully effective in our history, we need sound defence, practices of watchfulness, courage and patience and willingness to go on doing the countless small things that sustain our fidelity, and doing them in the community of others who share the struggle.

In our feverish and impatient world, it is an important part of our Christian witness that we should be reminding people that our humanity needs time to grow, needs the time in which self-awareness, repentance and renewal can flourish. It is hard for so many to recognise that the path is a long one that becoming human in God's way is a lifetime's matter. Yet the alternatives, so visible all around us, represent a trivialised and shallow humanity, anxious, angry and selfish, unwilling to look afresh at the self in the light of love and truth.

Thus the discussions at Bose taking place around the theme of spiritual struggle will be of real pertinence to the world we live in. We need the tools to diagnose all the strategies that are at work to destroy life and undermine hope. We need an awareness of the resources necessary to sustain our courage and our patience. Above all we need a spirit of thanksgiving for the victory already won, for the resurrection of Jesus Christ which 'tramples down death by death'.

May these days be a potent and persuasive witness to the Paschal triumph which alone supports us and gives us confidence in the daily labour of surrendering our spirits, souls and bodies to Christ Our Lord.

+ Rowan Williams

From Lambeth Palace, London

Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary 8 September 2009