

House of Faith: Early Christianity and the Greco-Roman Household

(The second annual *Integritas* lecture given by Professor Sean Freyne, on Saturday, October 21st, 2006, at *Integritas*, Ennisnag, Stoneyford, Co. Kilkenny.)

In the familiar gospel story of the cure of the paralytic, found in all three gospels, there is an interesting but little observed difference of detail in the telling. Mark relates that the friends of the paralytic dug a hole in the roof of the house in order to lower the sick man into the presence of the healer, whereas Luke says that they removed tiles from the roof in order to perform the task (Mk 2,4; Lk 5,19). An insignificant point, you might say, especially since the outcome of the story is the same, namely the man was cured by Jesus in all the accounts. Indeed, Matthew decides to ignore the details entirely (Mt 9, 1-8). Yet this little example is a pointer to two different contexts within which early Christianity was to operate, namely the Jewish Palestinian milieu of the peasant culture of Galilee and the Greco-Roman urban world of Paul and the other early missionaries. The housing material was different – a straw or mud roof and a tiled one - different materials and different milieus. Yet the social and religious system of values that operated underneath those roofs was different also. Let us briefly examine this contrast more fully, as it provides the background for understanding the phenomenon of the house church in early Christianity.

The Palestinian Jewish world was a pretty uniform milieu: Jewish ideas of the home and the village dominated; households were determined by strong boundaries of kin maintenance based on blood relationships, the regulation of marriages, the non-admission of outsiders to the group, the preservation of group identity by observing some aspects of the dietary and other purity regulations. The Pharisees in particular were interested in promoting these aspects of a home-based Judaism in contrast to the temple-based practice propagated by the priests. In their view the rules that pertained to the priests in the Jerusalem temple should equally apply to the householders in the villages. This involved a whole set of regulations to do with sowing and harvesting the crops, the preparation of food, the maintenance of vessels and the restoration of purity and many other topics, as these are discussed in the great Jewish law book, the Mishnah. While ownership of the land was based on individual house-owners possessing their own plot, inevitably there was collaboration and sharing between the various households that went to make up the village community.

Archaeological evidence shows that the typical settlement involved a number of households sharing communal facilities such as washing and baking, all located around a central courtyard with separate sleeping quarters for different family units. Domestic animals also could share this common space, indicating the close relationship between all forms of life in the pre-industrial world. The primary objectives of the unit were stability, subsistence and safety, though in the larger villages one can detect the beginnings of industrialisation on a small scale in terms of production of household pottery, linen goods, oil and wine making – the provision of the basic necessities, In the Lake district of Galilee the fish industry was highly developed and this involved ancillary industries of pottery and salt production, as well as sail making and boat building. This is a very generalised picture of course and life was indeed changing despite the efforts at stability and permanence in which religious

observance played such an important role. While Jews had become accustomed to cities in the greater Diaspora, the absence of any real cities of a Greco-Roman type in Galilee made the village people suspicious of the urban environment that was introduced by Herod Antipas, when Jesus was growing up. According to the biblical idea as expressed in Genesis, (chs. 4 and 11) cities were a sign of human hubris and sinfulness.

Moving to the Greco-Roman world, houses and households played a rather different role. Even in the countryside the emergence of the Roman Villa, or great house, was at once a sign of the romanticization of the rural life, as expressed by Roman poets, but also a mark of the erosion of an older way of life, a transportation of urban values into the rural world: 'urbs in rure rather than rus in urbe'. This development of large estates led to the flight from the land of impoverished peasants, who now found themselves living in the notorious urban *insulae*, or tenement dwelling complexes in over-crowded conditions, which were full of malodorous smells and prey to disease and penury. However, the typical urban dwelling in between those of the aristocratic elites and the urban poor are the ones we should think about when we hear of house churches in Corinth, Rome, Ephesus or wherever. These dwellings and their regulation of internal space were designed to accommodate the public role of the paterfamilias within the fabric of the city. Hence the open space or atrium where his clients could meet the man of the house, the *triclinium* or dining room where he could recline with his male friends, the women's quarters where female slaves worked under the direction of the family matron, and the shrines to the household gods who protected the whole enterprise.

Socially, this architecture reflected the structure of the empire itself, where the emperor as Father of the Fatherland was the universal patron, and his subjects were his clients. In general it can be said that the early Christians were much more likely to have come from this 'middle class' social milieu than from those of the elites or the poor. Paul reminds his Corinthian converts that not many of them were of noble origin or powerful, implying that some indeed were, but the majority would have come from the retainer class, that is those who were only relatively independent within the social structure of the city, and who, therefore, operated within the system of values that bound the group together and insured its stability. Turning to *Acts of the Apostles* we can get a better picture of who these people were and how they might have been attracted to the new faith that was competing with both the traditional deities and the newer cults that were often seen as eastern and suspect.

This contrast between the two types of houses hinted at in the Synoptic story is intended to draw attention to the social role of houses and households in the Greco-Roman world and to suggest that focusing on this larger background helps us to understand the distinctive Christian view of the household that emerges. It also assists us in understanding the adaptive capacity of the early Christian movement as it crossed the Mediterranean from its Galilean homeland to its new centre, Rome. An appreciation of this adaptability – accommodating change while retaining its core values – can be an encouragement to groups, such as this one here at *Integritas*, not to be afraid to explore different possibilities of being church, in a critical and self-critical way, to be sure - in face of the pressures of modern globalisation and social change. In entering a dialogue with the early Christian household communities it is important to realise that one cannot expect a blueprint for our situation today from the ancient

texts. Our world is not the same as theirs and our questions are not identical to theirs. Yet once this gap between us and them is acknowledged, it is still interesting to find that there were aspects of their situation that can speak to us also, not least the fact that the notion of family on which we place so much emphasis today was a far more fluid and open-ended reality than that of our idea of family as nuclear and free-standing.

In what follows, I want to return to the Palestinian and Greco-Roman households and deal with each in turn by exploring the ways in which the notion of ‘the household of the faith’ emerged in relation to each type as outlined earlier. It will emerge that the notion of the Christian movement as a household bonded together by ties of belief and practice, rather than by blood or social factors, was a deeply held conviction by both the Jesus-movement in the Palestinian context and the Christ-confessing churches of the Pauline mission.

I. ‘Who is my Mother and who are my Sisters and Brothers?’ Jesus and the House of Faith.

Once we begin to think concretely about Jesus and the topic of houses we encounter a strange paradox: the stone mason/carpenter who must have been engaged in the building of many houses does not seem to have had any of his own during his public ministry! ‘The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head’ (Mt 8, 20; Lk 9,57). Of course we do find him regularly in the houses of others, but when he is there he is either challenging the assumptions of the householder who had invited him or breaking the rules of oriental hospitality in one way or another. Not the kind of person you might think of inviting to the Christmas dinner! Not merely does Jesus not own a house himself but he expects those who want to be in his permanent retinue to abandon theirs as well. One wonders what the industrious Zebedee thought when he saw his two sons, James and John, heading off down the road, not to speak of Peter’s wife and her mother, who had offered this wandering vagabond hospitality, only to see their pride and joy depart with him! Abandoning one’s house(hold) at any time is a painful and radical decision. In the ancient world it was even more drastic than it is for us, in a world where the average American is said to move five times during a lifetime. Our own cycle of ‘getting on the first rung of the property ladder’, up-sizing and then down-sizing again in later life, is an indication of how few of us remain attached to a particular place in Celtic Tiger Ireland.

In Jesus’ Palestinian milieu leaving home implied much more than just moving place. It involved cutting ties with one’s kith and kin as well. The word itself for a dwelling – *oikos* in Greek and *bayit* in Hebrew – referred primarily to the group and only secondarily to the place where they lived. As mentioned earlier, the typical family was both extended to include near blood relations, and trans-generational to include ancestors and children also. The more affluent might have slaves or servants as well, and these too constituted part of the household. Sharing the same dwelling space was not just an economic necessity; it reflected the way people understood themselves in relational terms, unlike our post-enlightenment individualistic understanding of the self that dominates our thinking. This sense of bonding was underpinned by feelings of shared belief and practice within a Jewish milieu, where blood and faith ties reinforced each other. Indeed to abandon one’s responsibilities to the group by

leaving home was seen as an act of disloyalty, as in the case of Jesus himself. The sons of Zebedee and the other fishermen of the lake region who followed Jesus were abandoning a relatively affluent life-style as well as an extended family, thereby exposing themselves to the stigma of disloyalty within a tightly knit kin-group, and even rejection and hostility. So important was the notion of loyalty to one's lineage that Jewish identity was established by genealogies real or fictive. Thus disputes could easily arise as to who were the real children of Abraham, the Israelite ancestor par excellence, even as late as the first century, as Jesus' disputes with his Jewish opponents indicate.

Mark gives the most extended list of what such a departure involved. 'Amen I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold' (Mk 10, 29). This list should resonate with an Irish audience – leaving land was part of the deal! Attachment to land is a defining character of all peasant societies. In a culture that suggests that ownership of a plot of land within this Holy Land that was Eretz Israel was a sign of God's blessing - being told to abandon this too was asking them to abandon their religious birthright as members of the 'chosen people'.

Sayings like the one just cited has prompted some people to claim that Jesus' call was ultimately anti-family, and therefore shocking to the ears of all who see the family as the corner stone of human society. And there is more to substantiate that claim. When a woman in the crowd enthusiastically called out: 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that suckled you', Jesus' reply sounds harsh and uncaring: 'Yea, rather blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it.' (Lk 9,11). On another occasion, on being informed that his mother and brothers were outside calling him, he replied: "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" and looking around said: 'Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters. Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother' (Mk 3, 31-35). Indeed so strong is this aversion to natural family ties that Jesus declares: 'He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and he who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me' (Mk 10,37f). This call to discipleship of Jesus is so absolute, that a young man who asks that he first go and fulfil his religious duty of burying his father is told 'Let the dead bury the dead; you follow me.' (Mt 8, 23).

To begin to make some sense of this list of harsh, anti-family sounding statements, which seem to mirror Jesus' own lifestyle, it is important to ask ourselves how they were likely to have been heard by his audience, the peasant Galilean villagers for the most part? Many of these were already precariously attached to their inherited plot of land, as the pressures of Roman imperial power began to encroach on their lifestyle. Some of them would have vivid memories of Roman soldiers sacking villages and carrying off women and children, in order to suppress the revolt at Sepphoris on the death of Herod the Great in 4 b.c. Elsewhere, I have drawn attention to the economic and social changes in first-century Galilee that were reflected in the re-building of Sepphoris and the founding of Tiberias by Herod's son, Antipas, when Jesus was a young adult. These were the circumstances against which Jesus ministry was lived out and which shaped his insights and his strategies. Loss of land due to inability to pay rents and taxes in order to support Antipas' ambitions was the order of the day.

The emergence of large estates with their Villa-style dwellings were in stark contrast to the small peasant settlements with their modest quarters and circumscribed plots of poorer land. These called for intensive labour in order to achieve mere subsistence. What sense does such a life make when held up to the mirror of a land flowing with milk and honey, the fruits of which were to be shared by all the children of Israel according to the great prophets? Were present conditions to be seen as punishments for Israelite infidelity, and therefore to be accepted meekly, or did they represent the presence of human evil associated with foreign empires, and therefore to be resisted? And if this latter was the more common view of many Jewish writers of the time, then how best was this resistance to be achieved?

Rather than advocating violence against the economic and social oppressors – a path adopted by some of his contemporaries - or insisting on Job-like acceptance of misery as part of the human condition, Jesus chose another and more radical way. His strategy was to seek to re-image the world of human and social relations very differently to that of the *status quo*. He chose this path in the name of the Israelite God: 'I thank thee Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to little children' (Mt 11,25).

Two contemporary trends that were the direct result of these major global changes are worth noting, as they shed light on Jesus' radical and harsh-sounding statements about family relations and family concerns. One development (a trend discernible both among Jews and Romans) was that of opting out of society for a life lived far away from cities and the allurements of the urban life. In Jesus' homeland the Essenes e.g. adopted a celibate, communal lifestyle where study and contemplation were cultivated, thereby imitating within the Palestinian milieu the tradition of philosophers choosing a contemplative stance in order to pursue their vocation with serenity. Alternatively, groups like the Cynics continued to live in cities, but behaved in an anti-social way in terms of dress, public behaviour and refusal to conform to the accepted societal norms. Both reactions were clearly counter-cultural, rejecting the prevailing Roman values of honour, prestige and order, based on wealth and opulence.

At the same time the emergence of a sole ruler in Rome after almost a century of domestic civil wars gave rise to ideas of a new age of prosperity and peace. Ancient domestic values were to be revived and respect for the ancestral gods fostered. Part of the imperial propaganda for this new, world-wide movement was to foster ideas of an imperial household, with the emperor himself as the Father figure, the Pater Patriae, guarding the values of peace, prosperity and order, as the fount of all wisdom. The old Latin values associated with the household were now transferred to the world empire that was Rome. Ideally, the empire was conceived as a household writ-large, consisting of a pyramid of such patriarchally controlled centres whose existence would ensure the maintenance of the values on which the new world was to be built. Those who were high enough up the pyramid of power were actually rewarded by being invited into the imperial household, as was the case with the Herods, several of whom were educated in Rome alongside future emperors. On returning home their ambition was to continue to propagate Roman values in their style of rule, thus continuing the image of the Empire as consisting of one large household.

These two trends within Roman society – the portrayal of the Emperor and his rule as constituting the ideal household on the one hand, and the resistance of some groups, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, to such propaganda and the type of rule it gave rise to - provide the proper matrix for understanding the Jesus movement and its radical ideas about family relations. As the instigator of a counter-cultural movement, he rejected the idea of the house and household as this had been co-opted for propaganda purposes both within Judaism and Greco-Roman society. At the same time he adopted family and house metaphors to express the inner life that his group should aspire to, but thereby also subverting the ordinary meaning of these metaphors. Thus, Jesus can speak of his community as a house built on a rock, solid in its foundations but not concerned with grandiose architectural features, such as those that could be seen in the Jerusalem temple or the Herodian palaces, which could easily dazzle the eyes of Galilean peasants visiting the Holy City (Mk 13,1f). The members of his community are all fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, irrespective of their blood relationships. Gender stereotypes are confused and overturned and patriarchal power and control abandoned. In short his movement was a social and a religious revolution in terms both of the prevailing norms within Roman society at large and Judean religious practice, domestic and societal.

I have been suggesting that when we look at Jesus and his movement within the context of both Roman imperial culture and Jewish religious sensibilities from the perspective of households and families, his project was a radical and daring response to the power relations of his own time. Not everybody was able to join in this radical renewal movement, even when aspects of this were attractive and beneficial. It is surely significant that Jesus did not chide those Galilean peasants whose circumstances did not allow them to express their discontent in such forceful and radical ways. Significantly, it was to the relatively affluent fishermen of the Lake region that he made his most radical call. He did not remain in the desert with his mentor, John the Baptist, adopting the Essene-like stance of detachment. Instead he returned to the hard-pressed Galilean villages and hamlets, meeting them sometimes in houses and sometimes in the open air, but carefully avoiding the urban contexts of Herodian affluence. His parables and sayings were thinly veiled critiques of those centres and the values they espoused – large estates, absentee landlords, maltreatment of servants and slaves etc. ‘Those who are dressed in fine garments are in royal palaces’ was his judgement on the rich and powerful Herodian elite (Mt 11,8). The poor, the blind, the maimed and the lame – the socially disadvantaged were in his view the ‘blessed ones’, not those who prospered and received due honour in the society. His charismatic healing powers may have brought relief to some of the physical ailments he encountered, but it was his words which reassured them of belonging to a different royal household, that of God’s, that were the real healing power of his ministry. In this new and coming house/kingdom there may have been many mansions, but within these there were no distinctions in terms of wealth, esteem, gender or hierarchy. His permanent retinue that modelled this new household may have been few, but they provided a light for those living under the darkness of imperial rule and temple religion, each with its own form of oppressive values.

II. A Clash of Values: Early Christianity in the Greco-Roman Household.

The picture of Jesus and his movement that I have been painting is based for the most part on the Synoptic Gospels, read against the backdrop of the culture of Greco-Roman Palestine, as this can be recovered through historical and archaeological enquiry. When we turn to Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline writings we are moving into a different world of Greco-Roman society. In direct contrast to Jesus, Paul's mission was urban-based, and the countryside never really comes into view in the literature. Not merely is the change one from rural to urban, but it is also social. The new movement rapidly attracted upwardly mobile types, including wealthy urban matriarchs, reaching even the imperial household itself (Col 4,10). In order to appreciate the significance of these changes of both locale and social strata, it is important to emphasise just how much the typical urban household was built into the structures of the Empire. The shift carried with it the possibility that the radical vision of Jesus, which had been honed in the context of opposition to Roman urban life, might be blunted, or even lost entirely. Cicero, the Roman philosopher/statesman spoke of the sense of duty (a very important Roman word) that householders were bound by as follows: 'First to country, then to parents, next come children and the whole family (*domus*) who look to us for support and have no other protection, and finally our kinsmen.' You will notice that there is no mention of wives here – they are simply part of the *domus* or household, together with servants, slaves and others. In Cicero's view the household replicated the proper order of Roman society as a whole. It should be remembered that in this regard the Romans were indebted for their ideas to Greek political thinking. Aristotle had claimed in his Politics that the household was the basic unit of the *Polis* or city-state, and he devotes considerable attention to its internal relationship: 'those of master to slave, husband to wife, father to children.' The male, as master, husband or father is the person who maintains the whole structure.

In view of this situation we might well ask whether Paul's strategy of targeting the household as the nucleus for this new, anti-imperial movement was deliberate, fortuitous or based on the necessity of anonymity. In order to summarise what is a very large subject I will confine my remarks to discussing some of the advantages and disadvantages of the move. This should enable us to draw up a balance sheet, as it were, and hopefully also draw some lessons for our own efforts to renew ecclesial life today through a return to the origins.

Advantages

(1) It should be remembered that Paul himself was an urbanite – a native of Tarsus in Cilicia and a Roman citizen as well. He could speak Greek, the international language of the day, and clearly had some elements of the standard education of a young Greco-Roman male, though Jewish by birth and persuasion. He was too an artisan, a tent-maker, and was able to ply his trade in various cities, as he himself declares, so that he would not be a burden to any of his converts. This put him in touch with the artisan class in both Corinth and Ephesus, the cities where he stayed longest. In pre-industrial societies artisans comprised a mobile and highly travelled class, it transpires from inscriptions and other evidence. Mobility also implied the need for hospitality, a feature of the early Christian movement from the beginning, it

would seem. A close reading of Paul's letters shows just how mobile he and many of his co-workers were. In his letter to the Romans, written before he had ever visited that city, he sends greetings to 16 different men and women whom he had encountered previously, and who were now in Rome. Thus, e.g. Aquilla and Priscilla, whom Paul encountered first at Corinth (Acts 18,1-4), were variously to be found in Pontus (near the Black Sea), Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and later again in Rome. Lydia the seller of purple cloth was from Thyatira in Turkey, but Paul met her as a well-established house owner in Philippi in northern Greece, sufficiently affluent to be able to accommodate Paul and his companions in her home (Acts 16).

Mobility, then as now, lead to a greater openness to others, and early Christians, like their Jewish Diaspora forerunners, were happy to receive such strangers into their homes on the basis of mutual trust arising from a shared belief. Thus the household provided a haven for the travelling missionary, something Paul is deeply conscious of in his various greetings. Christian households were not totally free-standing entities, therefore, but part of an international network, so much so in fact that the practice of hospitality became a key plank of early Christian ethical instruction. Paul can admonish the Romans as follows: 'Let love be genuine Love one another with brotherly (sic!) affection, contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.' (Rm 13,9-13).

(2) Closely related to this sense of openness and friendship is the opportunity the household provides for breaking down racial barriers. Unlike the Jewish household where blood relationships were very important, given the intra-ethnic nature of the religion, Greco-Roman households could easily be ethnically mixed, especially those that had household slaves. One wonders whether Paul's famous declaration 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female, for all of you are one in Christ' (Gal 3, 28; cf. 1 Cor 12,13; Col 3, 10-11 where the same formula is used but without the reference to gender), was the result of his experience within a Christian household. Jesus' death that was commemorated in the Christian Eucharist was 'on behalf of the many' and slaves as well as free could equally participate in its saving power. Writing to Philemon in the short note that we find in the NT, Paul admonishes the wealthy slave-owner to accept back the runaway slave, Onesimus, as a brother. Yet he does not take the logical step of asking Philemon to liberate him as a free man. This reluctance is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that he can ask him to have the guest room ready, as Paul hopes to pay him a visit shortly (Philemon 22). Clearly, practice of the Christian faith within the household setting came up against the prevailing societal norms in a most direct manner. Even when the breakthrough in terms of praxis that might be expected did not always occur, hierarchical structures that were deeply inscribed were confronted with the possibility of an alternative vision of human community. Paul must have felt the tension between this new vision and the old structures, but for whatever reason did not carry his critique that far.

(3) Nowhere is this tension more obvious in early Christianity than in the case of the role of women. If Dan Brown's blockbuster has done any good, it is surely in the fact that he has brought to the forefront the ambivalent position of women within the new movement. Apart from the cult of Dionysus, where women were the original devotees of the god – albeit through an alcohol-induced altered state of ecstatic consciousness – Early Christianity is the one movement from the Greco-Roman world where women do feature prominently. And yet In the background the burden of

the Greco-Roman household structures loom large. The Palestinian Jesus movement was certainly highly unconventional in terms of prevailing Jewish norms with regard to women – so much so in fact that in all probability the charge of being ‘a wine-drinker and a glutton, the friend of sinners’ was intended by Jesus’ opponents to label him as the leader of a Dionysiac group which included women, thereby seeking to discredit him totally in the eyes of pious Jews.

What of Paul and women? Once again, it would seem we are confronted with the same ambivalent position as in the case of slavery. The assertion ‘Neither male and female’ is never fully translated into action. On the one hand Paul consorts freely with women – Lydia in whose house he stays, and Priscilla are obvious cases in point, though other women such as Junia who is called an apostle and Chloe also occur as prominent leaders of house churches (Rm 16,6; 1 Cor, 11). Lydia is described by Luke as a god-fearer, that is, a pagan who has been attracted to Judaism but without converting fully. Paul first encounters her at ‘the place of prayer’ (synagogue?) outside the city walls on the Sabbath day with other women. He freely accepts her offer of hospitality, and later Luke suggests that there was a house church in her home (Acts 16, 40). Yet side by side with this acceptance of women we encounter the negative views of women in public life when Paul is dealing with the conduct of the church assembly as the *whole* church is gathered together. Clearly, women had leadership roles both to pray publicly and to prophesy within these assemblies, but Paul wants to rein them in, and in doing so seems to revert to the order of the patriarchal household rather than that of the Jesus-movement. Women, possibly wives, should have their heads veiled to avoid being *disgraced*, whereas a man should not be veiled, since a woman is the glory/honour (*doxa*) of man and man is the glory of God (1 Cor 11,6). Later still in dealing with the interpretation of prophecies in church, Paul declares that ‘women should be silent’ and ask their husbands at home, ‘since it is *shameful* for a woman to speak in church’ (1 Cor 14, 34-36).

It would take a full lecture to deal adequately with this issue, so here I will simply underline two key words from these passages – honour and shame. Mediterranean society has been described as an honour/shame culture, referring to different perceptions of behaviour in the public sphere, and the need to observe the rigid codes of order that society deemed appropriate. Honour is a scarce but precious commodity, referring, as it does, to the public esteem in which a person was held. It was therefore largely a male preserve, whereas shame could most easily be attached to a woman who failed to recognise her proper and subordinate position within the hierarchy of both the household and society at large. In using these quasi-technical terms to prohibit women’s active participation in the assembly of the whole church, Paul is simply adopting the received categories of Greco-Roman patriarchal society and applying them uncritically to the role of women in the Christian assembly. In this regard Paul is not very far removed from Cicero’s position: Women should remain invisible in public situations, depending on their husbands to explain what they may not have understood. To act in public in an unbecoming way, either in demeanour or in speech, was tantamount to being as disgraceful as being a prostitute or a female slave with shaved heads. Thus, Paul has clearly not broken through the strict household codes and their patriarchal values. Even worse, he seeks to defend the position by a doubtful piece of exegesis of Genesis chs. 1 and 2, where two different versions of the creation of the human being are given. Thus, the declaration ‘male and female he created them’ of ch.1, (suggesting equality between the sexes) is passed

over in favour of the account in ch. 2, which describes the creation of woman from man, and therefore her inferiority. The inconsistency of his position is all the more glaring in view of the fact that in the same letter he acknowledges that there is a church in Chloe's (a female name) house (1 Cor 1, 11). It would seem that in Corinth as elsewhere, house churches in women's houses were acceptable, but when the whole assembly 'came together' (a seeming reference to a city-wide assembly) it was still a male dominated world!

Disadvantages

At this point I seem to have already crossed over to the negative side of the balance sheet. It is time for me to list some of the more obvious disadvantages of the house church system as this played itself out in the Pauline communities at least.

(1) Paul's failure to challenge openly and fully the rigid household structures of the Greco-roman world, was to leave the door open for the re-patriarchalisation of early Christianity in the post-Pauline period. This is most obvious in the adoption of the so-called household codes as examples of Christian ethical response. These occur in later letters that are attributed to Paul, but which, most likely, were written by disciples after his death: Col 3,18-4,1; Eph 5,21 – 6,9 (cf. 1 Peter 2, 13-3,7). These codes are closely parallel to instructions from Greco-Roman moralists with regard to household management (*oikonomia*). Some scholars have tried to defend these instructions on the basis of signs of their adaptation to explicitly Christian norms (e.g. 'husbands love your wives *as Christ loved the church*'). But this argument is not very convincing in terms of fostering a relationship of equals – in the same instruction, women are asked to *respect* their husbands, that is, pay them the honour that belongs to them as head of the household. This trend is continued further in the later Pastoral Epistles, also attributed to Paul, and in other second century writings such as the Didache and the letters of Barnabas, Ignatius, Clement and Polycarp. The overall effect of this process was to fully re-inscribe the patriarchal structures of the Greco-Roman house within the Christian community, thereby offering a model of leadership for the governance of the church universal in the second and third centuries. It is understandable, therefore that in this same period many Christian women either opted for the ascetical life as a way of avoiding patriarchal rule in the home, or were attracted to the Gnostic religion, where personal religious experience rather than external authority became the basis for leadership. *The Gospel of Mary* is just one example of this process of extolling the role of women. The Risen Christ is presented as having given Mary a special revelation and she is appointed to confirm the male disciples who are fearful and downcast at his death.

(2) Returning to the household model as the prime unit of the new movement, we hear repeatedly that once the house head becomes convinced of the truth about Jesus, he and the whole household are baptised. Here again we see an overly rigid adherence to Greco-Roman values, where the paterfamilias is the determining authority in all matters to do with the household. Conversion to the new faith, as Paul describes his own experience, was highly personal – 'the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' as he puts it in Phil 3. One has to assume that within the structures of the patriarchal household there were those who were not so sure about the call, but their voices are forever silenced. It is perhaps interesting to note that of the four instances of

household conversions mentioned, three were run by males in some position of authority in the Roman administration, that is, they were public authority figures: Cornelius was a Roman centurion at Caesarea (Acts 10,2; 11,14); the Philippian jailer was in a position of control over Paul as a prisoner (Acts 16, 31-34) and Crispus was ruler of the Corinthian synagogue (Acts 18,8). Lydia is the sole exception in the list (Acts 16, 15).

(3) A third disadvantage of the house-based church movement is that it easily became prey to factional differences. We are best informed about the situation in Corinth. According to Paul the community strife was due to the fact that some people were using the fact that different missionaries had been involved in their baptism. This is clearly a reference to the household baptisms just discussed. Paul distances himself from this type of boasting, claiming that he had baptised nobody, but then correcting himself to admit that he had in fact baptised Crispus' and Gaius' households. Later in the same letter it becomes clear that the differences had to do with abuses in the celebration of the Eucharistic meal (ch.10) and the exercise of the spiritual gifts with which members of the Corinthian community seem to have been richly endowed (chs. 11 and 14). When the larger gathering of the various house churches occurred, ostentatious displays of wealth during the agape meal and showy exhibitions of various spiritual gifts took place. Paul condemns these aberrations as destructive of the unity that should inform 'the (whole) church of God that was in Corinth.' It is significant that the criterion he employs to judge the legitimacy of the spiritual gifts is that of whether or not they built up the whole. His repeated (4x) use of the architectural metaphor – *oikodomein* – 'to build a house' in ch. 14 shows that he is still thinking of the household, but now the church is a single household. There is only one 'church of God' in Corinth and it is the same church that is in every other city as well. Ultimately, for Paul, the most apt metaphor for this one church is biological not architectural. The church is the body of Christ, since it is the life of the Risen One that nourishes all who call themselves Christian, irrespective of the city or house to which they may have belonged.

Concluding Reflections

I have to ask myself at this point what relevance has all this for the project here in Kilkenny and what lessons might be learned from this attempt at 'a return to origins' in the light of what I have learned from Patrick's inspiring introduction and writing about your project? In case my account might be heard as demurring at his proposal for a house-based model of church, I want to endorse and support fully the initiative. Never was there a greater need to experiment and break out of the strait-jacket of the institutional churches, which we have come to accept as the one and only way to be church. For those who might be tempted to denigrate such initiatives as simply an attempt at setting up an alternative church, it is important to underline what Patrick writes: 'At a time when the institutional structure of the western church is undergoing profound change and erosion, there is a paradoxical need for a new structure which is also rooted in tradition, proven to be of the Holy Spirit and to work for the good of the whole church.'

Hans Kung once said that we have no more need for ecumenical commissions, what we need now is ecumenical actions, and that is one of the great strengths of this project, in my opinion, born of a deeply ecumenical family home. Yet we are all aware of the reaction that the Eucharistic experiment in Drogheda provoked earlier this year. One has to ask why was this, and what vision for the future did those who were opposed to it have to offer, in the light of this dramatic/prophetic action? When I hear hierarchs on both sides of the divide tell us that we should continue to pray for church unity, I begin to despair. Of course prayer in the sense of the opening of our hearts and minds to God is an essential element of the Christian life. But the old Irish proverb – *is maith le Dia cabhair a faghail* – is surely worth remembering also. Indeed true prayer, as an opening of the heart and mind to God, inevitably moves us to action in continuing to realise God's creative activity in the whole world. This surely, was the importance of Jesus' own desert sojourns, for the realisation of his mission, just as was the case with another northern prophet, Elijah, centuries before him.

Mention of prayer and its relation to our activity, I realise that I have not at all addressed the household as a centre for spiritual development and growth. Perhaps the picture that Luke presents of the early Christians in Jerusalem 'breaking bread in their homes and praising God with glad and generous hearts' (Acts 2, 43-47; 4, 32-34), but also attending the temple, suggests one image for a group such as this, nurtured by close contacts with like-minded people, but also active in the larger religious environment. But not even that idyllic picture is unproblematic. Luke in his account of early Christian history uses the house and the household as counter image to the temple and the synagogue. For the third evangelist, writing at the end of the first century, the house is synonymous with the unstructured, communal nature of the new movement, whereas the temple and the synagogue are the symbols of organised religion. At that time the Jesus movement was no longer an offshoot of Judaism but an independent movement that had come to the attention of the Roman authorities. In Luke's eyes God had given his answer to the Jerusalem temple and what it stood for, by allowing the Romans destroy it in 70 a.d. Luke ends his account of the way the centre had moved from Jerusalem to Rome by presenting us with a picture of Paul being visited by Roman Christians *in a house*, and expounding to them from the Scriptures that the salvation foretold by Isaiah and realised in the career of Jesus and the early church had now passed to the gentiles. The relationship between the charismatic and the institutional is always a difficult line to define.

In the light of this observation, three concluding suggestions occur from my account of the early Christian house church movement that might be worthy of consideration as we begin again to seek for more suitable structures through which to express and deepen our faith commitment at this time of rapid change and virtual collapse of traditional institutions.

(1) The tension between the radical and the conformist, between Jesus and Paul, that I have been suggesting, is a tension that each of us experiences in our own lives also. Most of us settle for the conformist, nodding occasionally and uneasily towards the radical. A famous incident of topical significance that comes to mind is that of a certain bishop who castigated one of his priests for 'being foolish' in speaking to a gay and lesbian group and who had received notoriety for his trouble. When the priest replied that he did what he thought Jesus would have done, the bishop impatiently interjected: "For heaven's sake let's leave Jesus out of this!" Most of us would gladly

leave Jesus out of this, or at least the kind of Jesus I have been reconstructing, perhaps not the meek and mild Jesus of much popular piety. Letting Jesus in can be a difficult and dangerous experience. Perhaps that is why Paul left him out for the most part too. Have you ever noticed how little Jesus, that is the historical figure who walked the roads of Palestine, features in Paul's letters? Yet the two had so much in common – Jews critical of their own tradition, artisans, travellers. What made the difference and why? This is for me as much a personal question as it is an historical one. Who am I? Where do I stand in the search for justice and truth in our world? Does Jesus really matter in my life, and if so what kind of face does he present? Have I domesticated him?

(2) Home is a comfortable place, so comfortable in fact that we might be tempted to make a house-church our home as well. House churches have returned to our consciousness with the rise of the charismatic movement, and inevitably some eyebrows, especially clerical ones, were raised about 'the goings on' in them! Sometimes one gets the image of the unruly Corinthians at prayer, and the wrath of Paul looking in, screaming 'this is not good building of the house of God; you are showing off'. Where is the more perfect gift of love here?' Undoubtedly, small gatherings of committed Christians coming together in prayer and contemplation of the spiritual life can be both renewing and deeply meaningful in our world where the spiritual is shut out by the busy and fraught lives most of us engage in. However, the dangers of cells functioning independently of other cells, is biologically dangerous, as we all know. The fact that Paul had to challenge the different groups at Corinth is a warning of the dangers inherent in individual house-churches developing strong group identities at the expense of broad grid relationships. The image for the church as body with its different organs functioning for the good of *the whole*, challenges the architectural one, with its less pliable and more rigid impression of what constitutes church. Being 'catholic' means being opposed to isolation or self-absorbed preoccupation that might lead to a sectarian mentality: only like-minded people are in a position to realise the truth. Above all, the litmus test of any spirituality that claims to be Christian has to be its ability to motivate its adherents to engage in the struggle for justice in our world – justice in our homes, but also justice in our social, political and religious institutions also

(3) The third issue that comes to mind is the question of individual freedom. The baptising of the whole household because the *paterfamilias* has so decided must be understood in the light of what has been called the 'dyadic' Mediterranean personality, where the individual's identity is absorbed into that of the group, giving rise to the idea of 'corporate personality'. Many today find this relational understanding of the self more psychologically satisfying by comparison with the sole, free-standing isolated self that is the result of the 18th century Enlightenment: 'I think, therefore I am' (Descartes). Despite this it would be impossible to turn the clock back to a pre-Enlightenment understanding. Individuals within the family circle must have the freedom to opt out of the house church, if they so wish. From that perspective the notion of what students of early Christianity describe as 'free associations' may prove a more suitable and manageable model of church in today's world. These free associations grew up in Rome and elsewhere in the empire when individuals who were disaffected with the formalism of state religion bonded into small *thiasoi* or associations, as devotees of a particular deity, such as Mithras,

Dionysus, or Cybele, the Great Mother goddess. All of these were, like Christianity, eastern in origin, and it was with these groups that the early Christians found themselves in competition for new adherents. Such associations did not have any public buildings, and so met in houses, as we can see so graphically in the Mithraeum that was discovered underneath the church of San Clemente in Rome. The success of the early Christian movement was its adaptability, and house churches were only one form of church that emerged while Christian identity was still a fluid and developing phenomenon. This is not to descry their re-emergence as one possible model for church today, but rather an attempt to suggest that we must always seek to learn from the mistakes of the past in order to avoid repeating them.
