

No more them and us

Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148

One of the questions that came up at last Tuesday's Hustings meeting was, "Are we all in this together?" It was a reference to a speech made by the Prime Minister some years ago, and which seems to hang around the political scenery of our country.

The candidates looked at the society in which we live, not just its fiscal arrangements; they talked about the needs of all of the people; they talked about minorities and the vulnerable in our community. And each one of them: Conservative, Green, Nationalist, Labour and Lib Dem, made it absolutely clear that, for them, yes, we are all in this together. It's not often I have attended a political meeting and come away with food for thought for a sermon.

At the heart of any civilised society lies the way in which we treat the vulnerable and accommodate diversity. There is a delicate balance between wanting to be sure that people living in our country, for example, are able to communicate freely in English with those around us, but not wanting to stamp out every form of difference and distinction in our rainbow society that makes the United Kingdom a place of richly textured and complex diversity. Being in community with those who are somehow different from us challenges our familiar ways of knowing, doing, and being in the world. It forces us to see things differently and thus to change our attitudes and behaviours. And that is a good thing.

Observing nature, we see that diversity is essential to balance, wholeness, and resilience. Ecosystems thrive when a variety of species of plants and animals nourish each other. Diverse environments are much stronger and less susceptible to pests and disease than one-crop fields. The world is a relational system full of complex inter-dependence among very different creatures. If we want sustainable communities, we must **always** welcome the 'other' and learn to see our neighbour as ourselves. Without it, we do not have community at all, but just self-perpetuating enclaves.ⁱ

The first Christians, and remember they were at that stage only interpreting how to be Jewish differently, were faced with this challenge almost from the very beginning. Paul, with his mission to the Gentiles – the non-Jews – was constantly in trouble with the orthodox, conservative, nervous Christian leadership in Jerusalem, that was headed up by Jesus' brother, James.

And in our reading today Peter, the chief disciple, also had to justify what he had been doing in Joppa. It wasn't being involved in reviving Dorcas, that we thought about last week, that caused the problem. It was the fact that he had been eating with non-Jews and possibly staying in their homes. We learn from the early church that believers were not reluctant to voice their differences. Peter entered the Jerusalem church and squarely faced his critics. Church life isn't always about playing nice and avoiding confrontation (nor does it need to be an endless battleground either – let's work for a balance). This Bible text reminds us that controversy needs to be voiced, not avoided, and conflict needs to be transformed, not ignored.ⁱⁱ

Peter tells his story. He tells about a dream he had of a great sheet coming down from heaven, held up by its four corners. In the sheet, different birds and animals that should, according to Jewish law, not be mixed, and certainly not eaten. Peter tells of a vision from God that told him, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' It happened three times, said Peter.

Luke is making a point, a great point: that in the Kingdom of God, all are welcome. There is no more them and us. Only us.

God, once again, sends the Holy Spirit to shake His tired, stuck-in-a-rut, prejudiced people. There is a sense in which this story generates a certain kind of terror in the heart of the reader: God's Spirit remains free, revealing God's intention in un-looked for ways. And it makes us wonder, if those followers of Jesus so close to the Christ-event in history were not prepared for the Holy Spirit's fresh initiatives, what chance do we have two thousand years late?

If we were to take this startling story from two thousand years ago and apply it to our world today, to our lives today, what might it challenge us to think about? It is no more and no less than challenging us to look at how we, today, **now**, treat people around us. How do we treat children and old people? How do we treat people with poor mental health? How do we treat

refugees? How do we treat people who are on benefits? How do we treat tax-dodgers? How do we treat people whose skin is a different colour to ours? How do we treat women? How do we treat men? How do we treat people who have addictions? How do we treat people we judge to be insensitive? How do we treat people whose sexual orientation makes us uncomfortable? How do we treat people who worship in a different way? How do we treat people who have no faith? How do we treat people whose crimes against others involved violence, or sexual abuse? How do we treat people who have let us down, or betrayed us? How do we treat people who have taken advantage of us? Are they, broken and flawed as they are, still God's children?

The Holy Spirit, through reluctant Peter, gives an answer: "If then God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?"

When the church leaders in Jerusalem heard this, they were silenced. And then, only after their silence, only once they were made to look at how they had tried to limit the love and welcome and inclusion of God, only then did they glorify God.

I do not pretend for one moment that any of this is easy. We live in Morningside where there is a right and a wrong side to Comiston Road. We live in Edinburgh where the school you attended puts you into a pigeon hole. We live in a world that is filled with 'them', who are not like 'us'.

God says, 'No more them and us; only us.'

Stories, not arguments, change lives. Peter told his story again about the cloud from heaven filled with all the wrong birds and animals so that minds and hearts might be changed. He didn't give them doctrine, or theology. He didn't argue much, or lead a debate that would have kept two sides apart, and create winners and losers.

Peter tells a story. A story of a great sheet lowered down from heaven on three occasions. A story that told how God would take and welcome and include anyone and everyone. A story that overcame stereotypes, and clichés, and distinctions. Peter said, 'This is my story, but it could as easily have been your story. This could have happened to you. What would you have done, if God appeared and spoken to you in this way. Would you, could you, have acted differently?'

No more them and us. Only us.

Look at our world today, and our country. The divisions between Nationalists and Socialists and Conservatives and Liberals and Greens. The divisions between Campaign Remain and Campaign Leave about Europe. The divisions between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. The divisions between Israelis and Palestinians. And all the rest.

As **we** go about our business in the church, the world is watching. Do we have anything to offer that differs from everyone else characterized by dissension and division? Can we broaden the table so everyone has a place? Can we demonstrate that for us not only do we believe, but we practice, that Spirit-filled injunction. “No more them and us. Only Us.” What a gift that would be, if the Church offered that to our fractured world.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation 22nd April, 2016, ‘Community’

ⁱⁱ Stephen D Jones, Feasting on the Word Year C, vol 2, p451