

Trinity 6 2009

As many of you know I have a dog. Some years ago, when we lived in the countryside, I had two large Bernese Mountain dogs. A frail old lady who lived down the road had two even larger dogs, one of which was also a Bernese, but this one was at least twice the size of mine.

When she became ill, I offered to walk her dogs with mine.

'They are very obedient', she said – 'you'll be able to let them off the lead'.

So off we walked through the woods and onto the lane beyond. All was well, with the giant dog plodding placidly beside me, until we came upon a farmhouse with chickens in the front garden. I say chickens, but these were no ordinary chickens, they were black silky bantams, most definitely posh expensive chickens.

With no warning, eight stone of canine enthusiasm charged at them barking wildly. No amount of calling halted his progress. The chickens decided that this was the time to see if their clipped wings would enable them to be airborne. They did. Chickens flew off in all directions. When finally the last chicken had disappeared, the dog returned, panting and slobbering and immensely pleased with itself.

The owners were out, so explanations had to come later. It took weeks before all the birds were found in neighbouring villages. They didn't lay any eggs for a long time.

I suddenly remembered this incident when I read the words from the book of the prophet Jeremiah:

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!
says the LORD.

The harshest words in the bible are reserved for those who misuse religion to create division and mistrust. It takes far longer to bring scattered birds, or sheep or people together, than it does to divide them.

In the second reading today, Paul, is writing to the church in Ephesus. His readers are gentiles who have converted to Christianity. This letter is extraordinary in its powerful expression of the unity that is found in Christ.

Listen again to these sentences:

in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus

making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

The reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles was no easy matter. There was distrust on both sides. More than that there was distaste, disapproval, disgust even at each other's practices. For Jews the idea of eating unclean animals was abhorrent, they had been brought up to believe that they were God's chosen people – other people really did not count – you most certainly could not intermarry, or even eat together. God disapproved.

For gentiles many found the idea of circumcision, or as they would perceive it, genital mutilation, barbaric. They found the isolationism and exclusivity archaic and dangerous in a multicultural society.

Bringing these two groups together in such a way that there was equality and understanding, a totally new way of looking at life, was the most remarkable achievement.

So, in these two readings we have examples of those who sow disunity, who create division, who scatter the flock, and of those who create harmony, bringing together in Christ people who avoided each other, or worse, even despised each other.

In the Anglican church today we have disunity.

How has it happened?

Sometimes it is through misguided enthusiasm, like a large dog barking and chasing chickens, the Christian believes that the way to get converts is to present slick slogans, funny soundbites, which will attract but sadly alienate in equal measure.

More often though, it is through condemnation – the exact opposite of Paul's approach in reconciling Jews and gentiles.

A new organisation has emerged within Anglicanism, it is called the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans. It was launched this month with much publicity. The Rt Rev'd Michael Nazir-Ali caused a stir by saying that Anglicans need to repent and be changed. I am sure that we all need to repent and be changed, but there is something about this organisation that implies that it is *others* who need to change, not them. They are specific about some of the people they want to change – gays. Nazir –Ali said:

“We welcome homosexuals, we don't want to exclude people, but we want them to repent and be changed.”

The Rev Dr Giles Fraser, vicar of our neighbouring church in Putney said in answer to this: “Homosexuality is not a sin. It is the way many people love each other and is a gift from God. Ordinary people in the pews know this. And they are a lot more theologically aware than the handful of narrow-minded bishops who want to play politics with the Anglican Communion.”

Two opposing views!

Paul, writing to the church in Galatia and in Ephesus was at pains to show that gentiles did not have to get circumcised and become Jews in order to be welcomed by Christ and part of the body of Christ. This was very hard for those traditionalist Jews who had accepted Christ to understand.

Today we have a parallel issue. How much change is needed before a person can become part of the Christian community?

Some change is need by us all. We have to learn to be honest, trustworthy, generous, patient, loyal, faithful in relationships, just, and loving.

We do not need to change the way we are made.

In the time of Jesus, there were many who felt alienated from religion. There were some who were not allowed to enter the Temple because they had a deformity or a disease or simply because they were gentiles.

Jesus spoke to these people who felt so alienated . They flocked to listen to him. He recognised that they were like sheep without a shepherd – scattered, uncared for, lost.

He reached out to them. Tired though he was, he healed them when they were sick, welcomed them, taught them, loved them.

He showed them the path of love that they could follow, a path that was open to all who were prepared to learn. He taught them to repent of sins – actions that harmed others or themselves.

But – and it is a big but - he *never* condemned. It was Jesus who said to the rich young man ‘do not call me good, only God is good,’ and who told crowd about to stone the adulterous woman, ‘let he who is without sin cast the first stone’.

Within the Anglican church today we have a divergence of opinion, and sadly that has become focussed upon the issue of homosexuality.

Whatever our views, surely we can learn from Paul’s work reconciling Jew and gentile in Christ. He wrote:

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

God made us all so very different and yet all humanity is called to love. Society cannot function at all without co-operation, and our vision of paradise is of a place where there is total harmony, total love, where there is no injustice, no violence, no fear, only love. We are not called to change the way God made us, but we are called to use those gifts in love and service. Then all of us, all who accept Christ, Jew and gentile, heterosexual and homosexual, all can be built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. There can be no division in Christ. Amen.