

## **Easter 5 – where do we belong?**

St James, Colwall, 2nd May 2010

I was reading a blog by an American Baptist minister the other day and I came across this interesting quote. He was talking about homosexuality and he said it had become like a religious war. “It’s gotten so bad that even the Episcopalians are fighting over it. And that’s scary because you expect the Baptists will make fools of themselves over stuff like this, but we always counted on the Episcopalians to keep their wits about them and not to allow themselves to get so divided over something, that they might actually split their church in two.

I mean, the Episcopalians can be kind of stuffy and all, and who knows what the hell they’re doing with all the chants and walking up and down the aisle before church, and what with the banners and all the different colours all time. But my goodness, they are the smartest ones of all of us church kind of people. If they can’t figure this homosexual thing out, what hope is there for the rest of us?”

Well it’s nice to see ourselves as others see us and I was quite touched by his faith in the Anglicans, but it does remind us of how our traditions can be a barrier. My first encounter with Evensong was in my college chapel and I almost fell off my seat when I heard people chanting the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis. I thought it must be something which was a hangover from mediaeval times which Oxford colleges did, but no, it was happening up and down the country. Well, I guess we know and love tradition, but we must remember that it can be a barrier and that is the message from our first reading today. The dietary laws seem ridiculous to us. They are irrelevant to Christianity and were forming a barrier which needed to be removed. But removal was difficult – they were very important to Jews then, as they are to fundamentalist Jews today. The reason is that they are symbolic of a person’s identity: in some senses traditions like this define who we are and where we belong.

We all have these feelings of identity and where we belong and there is no harm in that, but problems do start to occur when we use these feelings of identity to exclude people rather than affirming our own origins. If you find yourself saying of someone “he is not one of us” then you are on your way to committing a sin. We need to be prepared to question the assumptions and prejudices which make up our sense of identity to see whether they really matter or not.

Identity is a very important factor in elections, because it often controls who you vote for. This is because it is very difficult to judge policies. Take the economy, for example. Labour wants to increase National Insurance contributions while the Conservatives want to remove £6 billion from public expenditure. Now I can understand the arguments on both sides, but as for forecasting the effect of either of these measures, it is quite beyond me and I’m not sure that I would trust an economist’s forecast either. Policies are important and I think we should make our best efforts to understand them but at the end of the day there are so many uncertainties that I am sure most people vote on the basis of their identity – where do I belong? Is this my party? What have we always done?

So where do we as Christians belong?

Now I am against Christians forming their own political parties but Christianity should certainly be part of our identity. We are here to achieve the City of God as described in our second reading, where mourning, crying and pain shall be no more. Deep within our religion is the idea of the kingdom of God where truth and justice prevail and this ideal should be part of our identity and reflect the policies we are comfortable with and how we vote.

I want to talk about two aspects of the City of God today and the first is that it has no walls – it is open to all. It is not about excluding people but is outward looking to the world around us, an attitude which does not necessarily come easily to us, living in a Herefordshire village, but it should be part of our Christian identity. And quite apart from this, it is also practical as it is an attitude which is important for our country. Britain imports most of its food and energy, it exports some goods but imports many more and makes its living selling financial products some of which have proved to be of dubious value. More than most countries, we are dependent on the world to feed us and keep us warm. We live in a global economy and we should be concerned about its health.

In the world wide City of God, there should be justice and freedom from poverty and disease. And the news in the world around us isn't all bad. There has been tremendous progress in alleviating poverty and healing disease. We have eliminated smallpox and almost eliminated polio. The number of people living in poverty has declined. But there is still much to do. The earthquake in Haiti has drawn attention to the huge numbers of people who are vulnerable to natural disasters, which can only become more frequent as climate change takes hold.

Removing these injustices and the inequality in the world is not just something we should do because it is part of our Christian beliefs, but it makes sense too. It is part of practical politics. God doesn't tell us to do things which are bad for us. Removing poverty makes people more productive. Improving education helps the environment in ways which benefit us all. And if you are worried about immigration, why not work to make sure that people have no desire to emigrate from where they are. The City of God is a happy place. The walled community, repelling all invaders, is not. Let us not think that political parties are only there to look after their own.

While thinking globally, let me go on to climate change. This has not been a major issue for this campaign but it should have been and will become so in future years. Climate change is a challenge which civilisations have faced before and have, as a result, usually collapsed, allowing others to continue elsewhere on the planet. This time we have run out of places to go. There is no elsewhere – we have filled up the planet. And yet the solution to this problem is within our grasp, but needs taking now before it becomes out of reach. Are we going to tackle climate change now or leave an impossible problem for our grandchildren to solve? Of course not – the City of God is eternal. Just as it has no walls, it extends through time. We need to think of others apart from ourselves and that includes future generations who will have to clear up the mess we leave.

Of course, the local, day-to-day things do matter and do need to be solved locally and now. But like all political things our solutions will be characterised by where we belong. For a Christian this seems to me to require actions which result in sustainable lifestyles and resilient communities in villages, cities, regions, countries and the world. The only thing certain about the future is that it will contain surprises. Living sustainably means there will be enough to go round. If we are resilient, that is we build communities where people help one another and where the pain of change is spread equitably and the benefits of change similarly, we will be able to cope with the surprises in store. A Christian vote should be good for all.

I do hope you will vote on Thursday – but practical politics is difficult and a little prayer beforehand would not come amiss.