

Inn or Cottage – Belonging and Christian Hospitality

Jayne Ozanne, Jesus College, November 15th 2015

The horrendous acts of violence which we witnessed in Paris on Friday night are a salutary reminder of what happens when religion is hijacked by zealous fanatics who are consumed by adhering to the letter rather than the spirit of their Religious Law.

The Western World now stands united in grief, anger and righteous condemnation of what can only be called acts of Pure Evil. One does not need to be a believer or an adherent to any particular faith to share in this feeling of moral outrage. There is a line that the vast majority of us know has been overstepped. Politicians talk of our “shared values”, but really what I believe we hold in common is our shared respect for the sanctity of life, it is this that sets us apart from the rest of creation. It is what makes us human – and for those of us of faith, it is what connects us with the Divine.

History unfortunately shows us that the world has not been short of despots, who have had scant regard for this precious gift of life – from Nero to Hitler, and Pol Pot to Idi Amin. However it is when these tyrannical regimes take on a religious dimension – such as with the Spanish Inquisition or more recently with Al Qaeda - that we start to encounter a zeal that is impossible to rationalise with, and is deaf to any form of meaningful dialogue. As my dear friend, Canon Andrew White, who you may know better as the “Vicar of Baghdad” and with whom I set up the Foundation for Reconciliation in the Middle East, has said recently about the terror group Isis:

“You can’t negotiate with them...I have never said that about another group of people. These are really so different, so extreme, so evil...the only answer is to radically destroy them. It is a terrible thing to say as a priest, it really hurts. I will do anything to save life and bring about tranquillity, and here I am forced by death and destruction to say there should be war.”

So I wonder where your line in the sand lies? At what point do you say – enough is enough? What is the moral or indeed religious code that you apply to these situations, which touch on the fabric of humanity and our very right to exist?

It's easy when the choices are clearly black and white – when we're presented with such stark horrors as we were on Friday night. But it's far more difficult in the grey.

As a Christian, my moral code is summed up by the Two Great Commandments to firstly “Love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul and mind” and secondly to “love my neighbour as myself”. It sounds so simple – a Law of Love - a Law of kindness, of gentleness, of goodness, patience and self-control. A Law that requires giving and sacrifice. Simple, yes – easy, no.

The crunch comes when we believe that one stops us from doing the other – when we fear that we cannot be loving God with all our heart, soul and mind (the greatest commandment) if we are seen to love our neighbour for doing something we believe God would find abhorrent (the second commandment).

This has been the premise for so many religious wars over the years – the touch stone behind the vast majority of church conflicts from the Reformation to the present day issues over human sexuality. Some have tried to devise neat ways round it all – such as the unhelpful evangelical phrase (and I speak as an evangelical) that we should “Love the sinner and hate the sin”. But ultimately it's about where we choose to “draw the line” - who *is* my neighbour and who is not? Who is within the fold, and who is an abomination and therefore should be kept without?

I believe that this is what Richard Hooker, one of the Founding Fathers of the Church of England, was directly addressing when he reputedly prayed:

'I pray that none will be offended if I seek to make the Christian religion an inn where all are received joyously, rather than a cottage where some few friends of the family are to be received.'

I love this picture – and I’m afraid I am going to show my Tolkien colours now, and say how much it reminds me of that scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Frodo and his friends having bravely left the Shire, arrive at the Inn of the Prancing Pony in order they hope to meet Gandalf. Surrounded by men twice their size, from every part of this strange new land they have entered, they find a warm welcome from the Inn Keeper who gives them a room – echoes of another Inn story perhaps? *All* are welcome – none are turned away, a place to rest is found and strength given for the journey.

It is this same vision that the Prophet Isaiah shared in the Old Testament reading we heard – which I like to think of as our foundational birth-right as Gentiles. I think Eugene Peterson’s version in *The Message* puts this over incredibly powerfully:

“Make sure no outsider who now follows God ever has occasion to say “God put me in second-class, I don’t really belong.” And make sure no physically mutilated person is ever made to think “I’m damaged goods, I don’t really belong”....And as for the outsiders who now follow me, working for me, loving my name and wanting to be my servants – all who keep the Sabbath and don’t defile it, holding fast to my covenant – I’ll bring them to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. They’ll be welcome to worship the same as the “insiders”, to bring burnt offerings and sacrifices to my altar. Oh yes, my house of worship will be known as a house of prayer for ALL people.”

It’s hard to overstate how radical this statement would have been for Isaiah at this crucial time of serious moral and spiritual decline in Judah. Of course, it was punishable by death for foreigners, eunuchs or those with a disability to enter the House of God and to make sacrifices. But God had and has a different vision, made possible through the death of his Son, where *anyone* who loves Him is welcome.

I fear that instead of being seen as an Inn, however, which accommodates and welcomes all pilgrims on life's journey, we the Church have become not just a cottage – but an Ivory Tower. A fortified castle - accessible it seems to only a few who like the Pharisees in Jesus' day, have become wedded to the letter rather than the spirit of the law. We have placed heavy burdens on people's backs – such as who they can and cannot marry – and weighed them down with guilt and shame.

Sadly I fear, we have lost sight of who Christ is, of what He came and comes to do – how He brings life, and life in all its fullness. How He longs to know us, to love us, to support and care for us, to walk with us through every dark valley and mountain top experience. He IS love – as the Apostle John (the Beloved Disciple) himself assures us “love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”.

One of the most important passages of the Bible that I clung to as I was trying to come to terms with my faith and my sexuality is in the Psalm we had this evening. Psalm 139 speaks such truth about how God is constantly with us, through everything that this life can try to throw at us. But perhaps more critically it affirms that He knows everything there possibly is to know about us:

“You formed me in my inward parts: You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made....My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in secret and skilfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me.”

God does not make mistakes. We are each fearfully and wonderfully made!

I recently gave a Bible to a Vietnamese friend of mine for her birthday. I'd been teasing her that despite being one of the leading Eisenhower Fellows of her time, and indeed one of the best read women I know, she had not as yet read the most influential book in the World. Coming from a Communist nation, she did perhaps

have an excuse - it was obviously not a book easily available. But on receipt she asked me to read to her my favourite passage, and so I read this Psalm.

Later that very same day she had what she has since described to me as one of the closest shaves with death she has ever had. Although she normally has a chauffeur, she had chosen to take her scooter to get her quickly to a high level meeting at one of the embassies. Hitting a pot hole in the pouring rain, she hit the ground at speed and then felt the wheels of a bus literally shave the top of her head. Lying on the ground she said that the first thing she recalled was that morning's reading – "you hedged me in behind and before – you are familiar with all my ways". She has absolutely no doubt that God saved her life that day, and as a result she has called together all the other Eisenhower Fellows in the region and told them that they too should prioritise reading the Bible with her. She rang me later that day to say that this had been one of the most profound and moving incidents in her life, and that something very significant had happened to her. Good fruit – born of an act of love.

There are those in the Church who believe that as a gay woman who is keen (God-willing one day) to be married to another woman, that I am an abomination and that allowing me a place within the Church would cross a line that they feel God has clearly drawn. They try and love me whilst hating my sin, not realising that in doing so they are in affect hating and rejecting the core essence of what makes me me.

So am I their neighbour – indeed are they mine? How can we love each other whilst professing to love God with all our heart, soul and mind – which in turn leads us to fundamentally disagree on what we believe He says about how I should live my life? I believe they have become Pharisaic in their understanding of scripture, and they believe that I am wilfully disregarding what they see as God's clear moral code.

I could point them to the passage in Luke we heard this evening, where Jesus encourages his disciples to judge a tree by its fruit: "men do not gather figs from thorns nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush". Sadly I fear they do not

want to see or hear the evidence either of the fruit of loving committed same-sex relationships or the damage of their teaching on lives torn apart by guilt and shame.

So what is the answer? How does the Church ensure it is a House of Prayer for *all* peoples, a warm and welcoming Inn for those who are on life's journey?

How do we break down our Ivory Towers and storm the castle defences to ensure that all can find a place of refuge within the Body of Christ, the Church?

The answer is simple, but it is certainly not easy.

It is to love, and to continue to love. Even our perceived enemies – when they despise and yes, reject us. Because love never fails - it bears all things, it believes all things, it hopes all things and endures all things.

For me, loving the Lord my God with all my heart, soul and mind means that I need to love each and every single person He puts my way – including those with whom I vehemently disagree - as I need to love the Christ that lives within each of them.

Do I have a line? Oh Yes.

There are those who have no love in them at all, who are full of pure hatred and evil- as we see with Isis – and against whom we need to take a stand. But they are few and far between, and known by the horror of their putrid fruit.

The coming years will see the Church debate where it feels it should draw its lines on issues to do with love, sex and marriage. I pray that we do so in such a way that we all find ourselves on the side of Love. That we become once again an Inn of loving hospitality for a nation that desperately needs to know the love of Christ, rather than a Cottage – or indeed an Ivory Tower – which is for the selected few.