

Jesus College, Oxford: 10 November, 2013

“Do not judge and you will not be judged: do not condemn and you will not be condemned”

Walking out of the front gate of the bishop's house in Leicester is an adventure into religious identities. Just across the road is the parish church, on the corner 50 yards away a Congregational Church and two doors down the Jesus Army. Across the main road comes the Islamic Academy and 100 yards away the Chinese Christian Centre next door to the Hindu Temple and opposite the Methodist/URC ecumenical church. For good measure the Gurdwara is just across the high street and the Friends Meeting House a stone's throw from that.

When it comes to religion in Leicester, there is a great deal of it about. In a city now more than 50% Asian migrant, these different identities provide security and meaning for people who could easily feel themselves lost and alone. But, by a miracle of good grace and some luck they are not identities in conflict with each other (although they are sometimes in competition).

How different it seemed to be in Nablus on the West Bank of the Palestinian territory last Sunday as part of a pilgrimage I was leading to the Holy Land. We heard from Palestinian Christians living under extreme pressure, held in suspicion by the jihadist groups seeking to raise the temperature in the Muslim community while at the same time living under occupation by sometimes ruthless Israeli policies.

In that world identity defines who are your friends and who are your enemies. In that world religion is about identity ever against the other. For every “we” there is a “them”, the people who are not like us. It leads easily to the idea that those who do not share my faith – or my race or my ideology – do not share my humanity. At worst they are the unsaved, the unbelievers, the infidel, the unredeemed: they stand outside the circle of salvation. And it can lead to the belief that if faith is what makes us human, then those who do not share my faith are less than fully human.

History is littered with wars and genocides which have their origins in this way of dealing with otherness. Clearly the instinct to tribalism is deeply rooted in the human psyche, deriving from the experience of surrendering oneself to the elemental, powerful emotions of the crowd. Watch Arsenal and Spurs any day of the week and you have a vivid case study of how otherness and the solidarity of the large groups provide meaning and satisfaction on a weekly basis for tens of thousands of supporters.

And as the forces of globalisation grow ever more sophisticated with instant communication available to billions on every continent, so resurgent tribalism becomes more and more the means of asserting difference and distinctiveness.

It seems that our very dignity as human beings is rooted in the fact that none of us – not even genetically identical twins – is exactly like any other. None of us is replaceable, substitutable, a mere instance of a type. This is what makes us persons rather than organisms or machines.

So the great moral, political and religious challenge in a globalising world is about how we live with strong, healthy identities without the tendency to destructively tribal conflicts which have the potential to destroy our species?

This isn't a new question of course, but it has a new power and passion in the 21st century. The Old Testament struggles pretty constantly with it. The story of the people of Israel undergoing exile and slavery prior to their birth as a nation is the story re-enacted every year in the drama of the Passover – as if to say that only those who know what it is to be slaves understand at the

core of their being why it is wrong to enslave others. And this repeated ritual is what leads many Israelis to the view that this fundamental ethic needs to be internalised afresh in the light of what is being done to the Palestinian peoples in our day.

And this is vital because it is the great insight of the Bible that it is in the one who is different that we meet God. Abraham encounters God when he invites three strangers into his tent. Jacob meets God when he wrestles with an unnamed adversary alone at night. So the supreme challenge is to see God's image in one who is not the same as us. That is the exact opposite of tribalism, recognising the integrity of other cultures, other creeds, other paths to the presence of God.

And this comes to its most clear fulfilment in the Sermon on the Mount, the second part of which we have just heard read from St Luke's Gospel. This has been called "the charter of the New Order" – if you like, the instruction manual for living in the new age.

On our visit to Israel/Palestine last week we made our way to the Mount of the Beatitudes where Jesus is said to have spoken these words by the Sea of Galilee. In the north of the country we were only a few hours drive from Damascus and all the horrors of the civil war now devastating Syria. In the quiet and peaceful setting of the Galilean hills it was intensely moving to hear the familiar litany of blessings read once again – Blessed are the poor; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the merciful; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice; blessed are the peacemakers.

It is indeed the supreme formula for human flourishing, all the more poignant when read in the midst of the Middle East conflict which threatens more than anywhere else to detonate world war once again.

At the heart of it come the words of my text – *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged: do not condemn and you will not be condemned"*. Without the hard work of learning these virtues we are condemned to go on dealing with otherness by means of projection, tribalism and enmity. And these virtues of the Sermon are not created by markets or governments but in families, communities, friendships, congregations – or even dare I hope – in Oxford colleges. Markets and governments depend of these virtues but cannot create them. But the creation of them – of the virtues of the Sermon on the Mount * - are surely the most civilising, life enhancing, transforming things we can spend our life on.

Last year when the English Defence League came to Leicester, the city was tense and anxious about the potential for conflict especially in our Muslim neighbourhoods. The EDL's techniques at the time were to heighten fears about the otherness, the strangeness, the essentially alien quality of Islam. On the evening before the march, all the community leaders of all the faith groups came together in Leicester Cathedral. There were readings from the sacred scriptures of all the world faiths, followed by times of profound silence.

We learned that what the Gospel calls blessed are virtues very close to all the world faiths. That God's intended way for all human beings is the upside down world of forgiveness, humility and even love for the other.

And we learned too that these virtues are not just empty idealism but practical politics. On this Remembrance Sunday that is worth remembering. We will make peace only when we learn that God has made us different and wants us to love our differences as he does. God has created many cultures, civilisations and faiths but only one world in which to live – and it is getting smaller all the time.