

Holy Trinity Vision Statement Sermon 3

8th February 2009: "Celebrating diversity"

A few weeks ago when Tim, Hugh, David Saville and myself met to discuss the present course of sermons, Tim gave us a choice of subjects. I chose "celebrating diversity", a subject close to my heart, but also because in retirement I have come to value and welcome the diversity and cosmopolitan feel of both Headington as well as Oxford itself. You have only to sit on a No. 7 or No. 8 bus into town to see what I mean. You often hear many strange languages as well as English!

Let me return to our Vision Statement: "We aim to be a community which follows the way of Christ by celebrating diversity, by accepting all people as they are without judging - by offering welcome and support and actively involving all individuals regardless of their class, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability. We support the ministry of women at all levels in the church hierarchy."

I have always been an admirer of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, not only because we both happen to have been born in the same year, but more especially because he has always appealed for the Church to be a "rainbow" Church - a Church for all communities of Christians, a Church which is "inclusive". The message of the new President of the U.S.A. Barack Obama, is the same. As an African American, whose father was a Kenyan, and mother a white American, and who was brought up for some years in Indonesia, he epitomises diversity in his own person. In his presidential address, he appealed to all Americans, to men and women of all races, classes and genders, and most of them responded gladly to his call to work together for the good of America and the world.

I believe that St. Paul was such a figure, even though at times he could be controversial and even make enemies. He wanted the Church to be "inclusive", to accept the diversity of Jews and

Gentiles, men and women. On the question of race, he would not be budged. He fiercely opposed Christians who wanted to impose the Jewish law, especially the rite of circumcision, on all Christian converts. If Paul and those who supported him had lost the argument over inclusion, I believe that the Church would have simply remained a Jewish sect, and died out, and no-one would have heard of it today. Peter, Barnabas, Priscilla and Aquila and many other New Testament figures were "inclusive" Christians. Peter the Jew came to accept Cornelius the Roman centurion, because he found in him a fellow Christian, inspired by the same Spirit of God.

Much is made today of Jesus the Jew, and rightly so, but it is also true that at the centre of Jesus' teaching and message was a gospel that proclaimed the Kingdom of God for all men and women and not just exclusively Jews. Jesus offered healing and support to all sorts of men and women, especially outsiders, the lepers, the disabled, tax collectors, prostitutes and Samaritans, rich and poor men, women and children. To a thief, condemned as a criminal to death on a cross, he said: "Today you will be with me in Paradise." Jesus who welcomed the despised outsider became the despised outsider himself, by dying the death of a criminal.

And yet the record of the Christian Church has not always been as opening and welcoming to the outsider and alien as Jesus was. There have been times and places when Christians have raised barriers of race and class, gender and sexual orientation, naming each other as heretics, hurling anathemas at each other, and even burning each other at the stake. At the present moment our own Anglican Communion is passing through a period of bitter conflict between conservatives and liberals over issues of sexuality. Last year it seemed possible that our communion would fracture apart, with our beloved Archbishop sitting in the middle endeavouring in vain to hold the separate Provinces of our Communion together.

The Anglican Communion has traditionally prided itself on its "comprehensiveness", and used the word Catholic in its original meaning of wholeness and togetherness. We need to reiterate the words of our Mission Statement: "We celebrate diversity. We accept all people as they are without judging. We offer welcome and support to all individuals (and, I would add, all Christians), regardless of their class, race, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability." I believe that H.T.H.Q. is such a church, such a community of Christians. But so too are we as a community of Christians in Headington itself: what a diversity we are: - Methodists and Baptists, United Reformed and Roman Catholics, Pentecostalists and Quakers, Bible Churches, communities of West Indian, Korean and Chinese Christians, and Anglicans of different shapes and sizes, of High and Low Churchmanship.

Through the work of Churches Together in Headington we are coming to know one another without judging one another, but rejoicing in our common Christian heritage. And because of this we try to be welcoming and open to the whole community of Headington of which we as Christians are only a part. We believe in a God who loves and welcomes the whole of humanity, indeed the whole of creation. In his hands he holds "the whole wide world" and no one, no one is excluded from his love and compassion.