

“Us and them”

Sermon preached on 29th Jan 2023 (Candlemas)

Malachi 3: 1 – 5

Heb 2: 14 – end

Luke 2: 22 – 40

In our thoughts and discussions during the current Windows course – Windows into the Acts of the Apostles – the groups and I have already touched upon one of the themes that will follow us through the rest of the course. The question of whether and how those people who were beginning to call themselves the followers of the way – later to be called Christians – should continue with their Jewish practices and way of life. The issue, in those very earliest days of the church, was the extent to which those Jews who had become convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah could and should continue to live as members of the Jewish faith. In other words, how the teachings of Jesus could be accommodated within traditional Jewish practices. Practices which observant Jews regarded as absolutely central to their identity, things like Sabbath observance or the avoidance of sharing meals with non-Jews, had been over-ridden by Jesus and were being ignored by his followers, who nonetheless wanted to go on calling themselves Jewish and, indeed, continued attending temple worship regularly. For some, especially the rather up-market families who supported and facilitated the grand worship of the Temple, this was deeply troubling and the cause of considerable conflict and tension, especially in Jerusalem the centuries-old seat of Jewish religious power.

In our gospel story today Jesus is brought into the temple by his parents and all the prescribed traditional religious rites are carried out for him, showing us as clearly as anything could that God’s intention in becoming incarnate in the baby of Bethlehem did not involve dismissing all that had gone before. There is a clear and intentional line between old and new testaments in this story, and a blurring of the boundaries – indeed even a negation of any sort of boundary – between the old and new, the past and the future, between the ancient practices of Judaism and the new life that Jesus was born to bring to the world. Indeed perhaps this is some of what Simeon is expressing as he gives thanks to God for the light that will now go to all people, including Gentiles, and for the glorious climax to the history of God’s people represented by the baby that he takes into his arms. In this child the boundaries and barriers between old and new, between Jew and Gentile, between God and humanity, will be broken down and all the world will be one in the light and love of God.

It is a powerful and transformative understanding of this seminal moment in the history of God’s relationship with his creation ... but as the Windows participants have been reflecting as we study the story of the Acts of the Apostles, it was a new

way of doing things that was seriously difficult to put into practice – and indeed it remained thus for the rest of the New Testament period, throughout the history of the church and lingers on well into the affairs of both church and wider world today.

I was particularly struck by this a few days ago as I walked past the Holocaust Memorial Day exhibition set up in the North Quire Aisle and one of the panels caught my eye. It was headed 'us and them'. I remember well from times when I have introduced students to a similar exhibition at college, explaining how 'us and them' thinking is where so much of the world's oppression and conflict begins. In the Holocaust Memorial Day materials, 'us and them' language is shown to be the starting point for the 'ten steps to genocide' that, as is graphically demonstrated by the exhibition, lead inexorably to Auschwitz. And as I used to point out to my students, 'us and them' thinking like this is not just history, it is too often a part of our everyday language as we point the finger, literally or figuratively at those we consider to be different to us. When I am demonstrating this idea to 16 and 17 year olds, I usually ask them if they have ever heard the taunt 'oh don't be so gay' levelled at someone in the playground at school. I don't ask them to confess to either hearing the phrase or using it themselves, but I can tell by their faces that my comment has found its mark. And as the students and I walk through the ten steps and we journey from playground taunts to the gates of a concentration camp, the point again becomes powerfully visible in their faces.

It starts with 'Us and them' – our pointing of the finger at someone who doesn't look like us, or think like us, or behave like us – or indeed, others' pointing of their fingers at us for the same reasons. In the early church it was about whether Christian followers should be required to 'be good Jews' by following the letter of the law and a bit later it was about whether non-Jews, Gentiles, should be allowed to join the new movement at all. It has run through the church in various ways for many centuries and since the Reformation has been a significant driver behind the generation of many of the multifarious Protestant Churches that are now established across the world. 'We don't like the way you are doing things, so we're going to go and do our own thing over here!' We are going to be 'us' in this corner of the world and you can be 'them' over there if you like.

But the baby in Simeon's arms embraces them all. The baby whom Mary and Joseph brought into the temple for God's blessing in the traditional way, was and is the God of both old and new covenants, the God of both 'us' and 'them', the God who sheds light across all the boundaries and barriers. None of us has the monopoly of that light - the light shines on 'us' as it shines also on 'them' – whoever, 'us' and 'them' happen to be in our thinking at the time. Indeed sometimes it may even be that although we may like to think that 'we' over here in the church have the light which we may graciously shed onto 'them' over there – "the ones outside the church who

are currently sitting in darkness” - actually, sometimes, perhaps it may be ‘us’ who need to see that it is ‘they’ who have the light, and ‘we’ who may need to edge closer to ‘them’ in order to see more clearly.

None of this is at all easy, of course, either within the church or outside. For some reason human beings always seem to want to position ourselves as being in some way superior to our fellow-human beings – the righteous ‘us’ holding out against the iniquitous ‘them’. And its perhaps a failing that the church is particularly prone to. Perhaps we may even be in danger of finding the very root of our security in the knowledge that ‘we’ have something ‘they’ don’t have – when in actuality, of course, we are all of us called to find our security in God alone.

The NT show us clearly that, although they may have been tempted otherwise, both great leaders of the early church, Paul and Peter came to the realisation that this whole ‘us’ and ‘them’ way of thinking is in direct opposition to the gospel. After he had received his vision in the house of Cornelius, Peter explained to the other church leaders that: “I now truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation those who are god-fearing and do what is right are acceptable to him”. And Paul wrote something similar to the Galatians: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Peter and Paul both ‘got it’ – and taught the churches that followed them likewise. But, as the HMD materials show, and indeed as is illustrated by some of the current debates in the CofE, we need to be vigilant even today, if we are not to slip into the ‘us’ and ‘them’ thinking that carries the seed of so much of the world’s cruelty.

In today’s world – and too often in today’s church as well – the ‘us’ and ‘them’ of black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, liberal and evangelical, men and women, still enable the finger-pointing that seems to be embedded in our human condition. But the child in Simeon’s arms reminds us that the light of God shines on all humanity – indeed on all of creation – it shines equally on both ‘them’ and ‘us’ – and that for followers of Jesus that means that finger-pointing is no longer a part of the people that we are.

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