



Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
18 September 2011

The cost of inclusion

A sermon by Revd Clare Herbert

Readings: Philippians 1.21-end; Matthew 20.1-16

“I choose to give to this last the same that I give to you”

In the name of God our Creator, our Redeemer and our Sustainer – Amen.

Beware what you pray for!

Beware what you pray for, it may actually come your way! This time last year I had prayed for and received the invitation to the post of Lecturer in Inclusive Theology here at St Martin's. I was overjoyed!

I am still am, but the task itself feels daunting as I guess it should feel one year in! –It's not just the amount of tasks –everyone here works hard – nor is it the list of people to be included, this place tries to reach out to all and has always done so. No it's the task of learning how to be inclusive, what that might involve, and then living it in my own life which is daunting!

I travelled back to the UK from holiday reading my first English Newspaper for a while on the plane on the anniversary of 9/11. Palestine, I then read, was pleading for greater status as a nation in the UN and the US opposing it. A new human rights organisation called Kaleidoscope was starting up to protect the lives of Lesbian and Gay people across the world not least because they are being executed now in Iran. I was reminded as I read of the prophetic words of Kenneth Ross when he was acting Executive Director of Human Rights Watch in the early 1990s

“The explosion of communal violence is the paramount issue facing the human rights movement today. And containing the abuses committed in the name of ethnic or religious groups will be our foremost challenge for the years to come.”

Meanwhile, in the Church of England, Archdeacon Daniel Kajumba had been forced to speak out at my first residential General Synod in York in July about institutionalised racism – not in Big Business, not in the Metropolitan Police, but in the Church of England. He said

“This Synod's ethnic minority membership has increased by one between 2005 and 2010, from 14-15 members (dear friends there are between 4 and 500 people on Synod). Racism is still a live issue in its various forms, blatant or subtle.”

And we face a year both in the Diocese of London in October and in the General Synod in July in which we will be voting for or against women becoming Bishops and the substance of the voting will be not about whether they become so – that argument at least is passed – but whether it is permissible in the Church of England for them to become Bishops in exact equality with male Bishops or not, whether there needs to be special safety barriers set up to protect and isolate those who will not be able to bear the Episcopal authority of women over their parishes.

Hard built divisions seem to abound!

Well I knew that last year, surely, when I so much wanted this post. Of course.

What I have sensed more THIS year is that sometimes in working for the apparent good of one group, what we are merely doing is to overturn one sort of dominance, and put in its place another one! What I have noticed is that sometimes when we so called “struggle for justice” what we are really doing is working at victory for our own cause. What I am coming to realise is that what we all hope for in our emphasis on numbers, results, spread is at least in part security, based on an insecure need to dominate. It’s so easy to let the deeper quest for inclusion slip as if size, dominance, winning, pushing the boundaries of those who agree with us as far as possible is the right thing to do, the essence of the good life, the hope, even, of the Kingdom, while all else can go hang.

And I suppose that I have sensed that because I have watched the groups in which I belong working and wondered to myself what are we aiming at?

Women will soon be Bishops in the Church of England I am fairly certain – Alleluia, praise the Lord – but in what way will that social change bear the marks of Christ’s kingdom – will we simply copy all that has gone before in terms of hierarchy and patronage, in terms of colour of skin and well regarded marks of British education, in terms of recreating ecumenical and interfaith inequalities, in terms of repeating masculine language for an apparently male God?

Lesbian and Gay people will soon have their Civil Partnerships blessed in Church I am relatively sure – Alleluia, praise the Lord - but are we really listening to the cries of people who simply don’t understand the goodness of that? Or will we be pleased just to get our particular struggle over? When Rowan our Archbishop says that there are many parts of the Anglican Communion where he cannot be heard because he is deeply feared as being too liberal are we listening?

In other words in my work and studies this year I have come to see how hard it is for human beings to adopt a way of life in which their aim is not to win but to include, not to dominate but to submit to the other, not to dismiss and ignore but to welcome and embrace.

What’s to do?

In the context of thinking about inclusion today’s Gospel about God’s kingdom is devastating. It is also deeply healing, but it is devastating before it is healing. It is easy perhaps to enjoy inclusion in the sense of welcoming many different people to sit around one table to delight in each other’s company – but the inclusion demanded by this story goes much further. It is a vivid and even abrasive story about the radical and offensive nature of grace, it’s about the way that God includes.

The offensive jarring is set off by two sets of relationships. First there is the relationship between the owner of the vineyard and those who work all day and grumble at the owner’s apparently unjust systems of payment. The owner goes and pays those who work for only an hour the same as them! Some manager!

The world couldn’t work this way, could it? Measuring work done against pay given is part of a just social arrangement without which there would be anarchy and chaos in days! The owner, notice, doesn’t just give those who work little a small payment like the state pension or sickness benefit to tide them over as if they were old or unwell as we might in pity – he gives them the full whack!

And this superabundant generosity unbalances us because it causes us to look at our own religious attitudes and beliefs about what God is like. If grace, the full whack of God’s beneficence towards us has little or nothing to do with being good, or having standards, or keeping rules and gaining reward what IS our relationship with God built on? What is this grace and can we take it! How do we learn to take it? - how do we learn to bear the beams of Love?

Then there is the second set of relationships in the parable which gets us in even more hot water over the offensive character of grace! This time the relationships between the two sets of workers. Oh, I really like this bit – I don't mind what pay I get, that's great, that's enough, I can live on that and more some. But I am not going to be happy if that lot are getting it too! My happiness depends on my being on top and that means definitely their NOT being so!

The grumblers in this parable are not really against grace, they are against grace being shown equally to others! At the very least shouldn't these others at the very least agree with us, speak the same religious language as us, like the same way of life as us, before they receive grace?

I like the French word *bouleverse* in relation to this parable - it smacks more of discomfort than the English "being bowled over" – it knocks us over. It involves a whole new way of viewing God and ourselves, ourselves and others and is deeply discomfiting! No wonder this story is followed by Jesus saying immediately to his followers "Look I am going to be hung for this, they'll get me for this" – it's deeply subversive of power hierarchies taking the place of God, of the ways we use the word God to back our particular cause.

What is the goal of inclusion, then? Is our Mission Action Plan wrong – aiming at advancing particular causes which we think just? As for the new vicar's job description, the word inclusion is written all over it like words through a stick of rock! Of course that's ok, of course that's ok. It's more that we need to learn, in order to BE inclusive, radical compassion, how not to push over the other, over confident of our rightness, in a spirit of awareness of God's love for us, learn both to speak and to submit, to live in interdependence with all made in the image of God – allowing ourselves to be moved by the meaning and the need of the other.

Perhaps the finest theologian of the last half of the twentieth century who helped the Church rediscover the existence of a just and benevolent God who suffered in the holocaust, who didn't preside over it, was a man called Jurgen Moltmann who wrote about "A Crucified God." Recently he challenged Miroslav Wolf calling out from the audience at a conference. Wolf is a Croatian theologian who may well turn out to be as powerful a prophet as Moltman for this age, in his ability to address the divisions of our world and to call for nothing less than embrace among us. Moltmann hearing him shouted out

"You speak of Embrace – but could you embrace the Serb who has killed your people, your mother, your wife, your children?"

Wolf replied that no he couldn't – but that as a follower of Christ he thought he ought to be able to. It is that sort of inclusion, that sort of transformation in Christ which we may need to discover, if our emphasis here on inclusion is not to become merely a battle of wills and more something to do with the Cross.

Jesus imagines God speaking about God's own self-giving love. God says, so perceptively of our human nature, and so challengingly to our future,

"Are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first and the first last."

Jesus said – Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, speak well of those who spitefully use you – perhaps the goal and content of Christian inclusion is well summed up in this.