

LET THE REMAKING OF RELIGION BEGIN TODAY

MARTIN CAMROUX

I've been waiting for this for eight years. For the last eight years it has been very hard to think of America except through the focus of one of its worst ever Presidents. This week we have been reminded that America is capable of greatness too. A nation, many of whose founding fathers were slave owners, a nation where the White House was built by slave labour, has now freely elected a black man as its President. It was a day for Americans to feel proud and for the rest of the world to feel hope.

I am hopeful that America may have elected a great President. He will certainly need to be when you look at the challenges he and we face. "Let the remaking of America begin today" he said. But today not only America but the world is in need of remaking. And maybe so too is the Church.

One of the highlights for me of the day was Joseph Lowery's Inauguration prayer.

And now, Lord, in the complex arena of human relations, help us to make choices on the side of love, not hate, on the side of inclusion, not exclusion, tolerance, not intolerance.

That's a challenge for America, but also for almost all religious people. So it is perhaps providential that we find ourselves thinking this morning about one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible, the story of Jonah. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, capital of the hated Assyrian Empire, and deliver a message: "Change your ways, repent, or you're in for a lot of trouble." Jonah's response is to book a passage on a boat to Tarshish, a town on the western coast of Spain, as far away from Nineveh as he could possibly go. God however has other ideas. There is a great storm. The ship's crew blame Jonah and throw him overboard. And then God provides a big fish that swallows Jonah.

I heard of a minister who made the mistake of using this story in his children's address and asked if the children had any idea what Jonah did in the belly of the whale, and one bright little boy answered that "he got digested," which actually makes a lot of sense.

What the story says is that Jonah offers a prayer and is spewed up on dry land. God calls him a second time. This time Jonah goes to Nineveh, delivers the message, and then sits back to watch the fireworks. The hated Ninevites are finally going to get theirs. It's a kind of "God will get them for that" moment. But to everyone's surprise, the Ninevites, from king on down, repent.

What Jonah has not understood is God's mercy in not confined to the chosen people - it is there for all. Jonah is devastated. He has wanted nothing better than to see the absolute destruction of those he hates. Jonah is so angry he sits down to sulk. God appoints a bush to give him shade. The bush dies, and Jonah is so hot and miserable and exasperated by the whole experience that he says. "It is better for me to die than to live."

The story ends with God gently teaching Jonah a little basic theology—"You are concerned about the bush; should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are a

hundred and twenty thousand persons and also many animals” — which I think is one of the best verses in the Bible.

Here we have a Jewish story about God’s mercy toward “them”—the hated foreigners, the racially impure, religiously incorrect, decidedly unchosen. Here, at the heart of our theological tradition, which we sometimes call Judeo-Christian, is the radical notion that God loves Assyrians.

At the heart of our human problem is the way we somehow want to have people we despise and reject. The Nazis did that to the Jews and the Gypsies as well as handicapped and homosexual persons and played out that dynamic to the bitter, horrible end of extermination camps. And in our day alone, our brief sliver of human history, we have seen it repeated with tragic and horrible consistency.

Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda
Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan
Arabs and Jews in Israel and Palestine
Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland

And one of the things you can’t fail to see is that sometimes religion has helped to make this worse. Robert Burns, Scotland’s greatest poet, who I’m going to be talking about tonight, once said “Can you tell me why a religious turn of mine, has always a tendency to narrow and illiberalize the heart”. And you wish that you could say it wasn’t true but you know that often it is.

Recently there was an election for mayor of Jerusalem. The two candidates were a secular Jew and a member of one of the religious parties. Why was I delighted when the secular Jew won? Because over the years it has been the religious parties who have mostly been the most implacably opposed to peace between Israeli and Palestinian. The most extreme of them want to claim the whole land of Israel and drive the Palestinians from their homes. Radical Islamists can be as bad.

When I was in Syria this summer there was a Jewish quarter but hardly any Jews. Unsurprisingly when they were not allowed to travel more than not allowed to travel more than 4 kilometres out of their homes without a permit and synagogues were firebombed by religious extremists. And Christians can be just as bad. I see the Pope has just readmitted Bishop Williamson into the Catholic Church, a man who has denied the holocaust, and says he regards the Protocol of the Elders of Zion, one of Hitler’s favourite books, as authentic. A man deeply anti-Semitic – what is the Pope doing? Religion can “narrow and illiberalize the heart”.

The book of Jonah is a reminder however that God’s love is given not just to chosen people but to all. That the task of religion is to *us to make choices on the side of love, not hate, on the side of inclusion, not exclusion, tolerance, not intolerance.*

Why have we resisted that? Why can't we seem to get it? Is it because we don't want to? Is it because of our tribalism, our basic human need to define ourselves over against some "other," someone who is not chosen, not pure, not theologically orthodox? Is it so deep that we simply cannot and will not understand that God doesn't think like that—that, in fact, the tribalism that renders the "other" as expendable is contrary to God, opposed to God's mercy and love and forgiveness and reconciliation at work in the world?

To believe in God at all is to acknowledge that God is not ours alone; it is to acknowledge that God transcends our barriers, even the barriers we create in the name of religion. It is to acknowledge the limits of religion itself and all the accoutrements of religion: creeds, confessions, theological doctrines.

One of the very best of Charles Shultz's Peanuts cartoons depicts Snoopy, sitting on top of his doghouse, writing furiously. Charlie Brown asks, "What are you writing?" Snoopy answers, "It's a book on theology." Charlie Brown persists, "And what are you going to call it?" Snoopy looks up from his writing and replies, "The title will be, Have You Ever Considered That You Might Be Wrong?"

Today exclusive intolerant religion can contribute nothing to remaking the world. It is not however the only kind of religion. And the inauguration of Barack Obama was a reminder of that. Religion can reconcile and unite. If Martin Luther King had lived he would now be 80. I couldn't help thinking as I was watching the inauguration: "Well Martin you did it". The election of Barack Obama was made possible by the Civil Rights movement. And at the heart of Civil Rights was open inclusive religion, about love, not hate. Tolerance not intolerance, inclusion not exclusion. "Black and white together – we" walk hand in hand in hand" they sang.

The same is true with Barack Obama. Obama is a long standing member of the United Church of Christ and he has not wavered in his passionate faith in the progressive potential of religious belief since he first encountered it in south Chicago in community organising. He was in his 20s, and for three years he was trained in a politics based on a set of principles developed by a Jewish criminologist and an ex-Jesuit with borrowings from German Protestant theologians. Obama described these three years of community organising as the "best education I ever had". Michelle says of her husband that "he is not first and foremost a politician. He's a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change."

Unmistakably behind Barack Obama is that passion for social justice that runs through all religious traditions. So those liberal secularists who thought that they had seen the end of praying in the White House will have to think again. They might want to overlook Obama's faith, but he won't make it easy for them. Like it or lump it, he unequivocally believes that religion can be a force for progressive ends. A liberal secular elite on both sides of the Atlantic is going to have to deal with a much more challenging form of religious belief than those they have been wont to ridicule among George Bush and his cronies.

Our task in the days ahead, our duty, is to hold out for and hold onto God's universal, inclusive love that excludes no one. We need a religion that helps us *make choices on the side of love, not hate, on the side of inclusion, not exclusion, tolerance, not intolerance.*

Finally we need to see this is a matter of grace, the mystery that God loves human beings, loves you and me, not because of anything about us, but because God is God. Jonah stumbled

all over grace. God's love for the hated Assyrians, decidedly unchosen people, was more than he could stand. But it is the basic message of the story—and the whole Bible. It is what we see above all in Jesus Christ, who included everyone in the open-armed embrace of his love, who turned no one away. We should be the same. Amen.

*Rev'd. Martin Camroux MA
Trinity Church, Sutton
(United Reformed/Methodist)
Cheam Road, Sutton, SM1 1DZ*