

NO LONGER STRANGERS

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Ephesians 2.19 "You are no longer strangers".

The story is told of the man who after a particularly difficult time with his mother-in law burst out "I like the human race. All my family belong to it, and some of my wife's family belong to it as well". I suppose even in the best family the odd comment on relations sometimes gets made. But in a serious way it expresses an attitude which is at the root of many of our problems. "All whites belong to the human race and a few blacks as well" or "All Protestants will be saved, and a few Catholics might slip through as well."

What we do is we draw lines through the human race between us and them. There are those like us - they are OK, and then there are the others, those who aren't like us, they are inferior and the cause of all the problems.

Now of course there are real differences between people. There are differences of sex, race, culture, personality, political belief. In itself this diversity is an enrichment of life. But a basic root cause of human tragedy is the way we turn our differences into the ugliest of divisions. We feel sympathy for our own kind and stand aloof from those who are different. We project our anger, our inadequacy and our frustration upon those different from us.

Some of you may have had experiences of this personally. I remember when I was living in a flat getting complaints from the neighbours about the curry smells which they said from my kitchen. If I had been an Indian they might have asked whether I eat with my fingers!

I must tell you I am not a good person to comment on Big Brother. I have never ever seen the programme. I do not intend to watch until just after hell freezes over. I do think the people to criticise are not the contestants as the TV executives who set it all up. But the fact is that that cultural and racial diversity can lead to prejudice and unpleasantness. Britain is a tolerant country that we can be proud to belong but you can find racism in this country as you can anywhere else.

Jade Goody calls Shilpa Shetty "Shilpa Poppadom". Ron Atkinson calls Marcel Desailly a "thick nigger" on air and then claims he's not racist. Actually the problem is world-wide. I have never forgotten the first time I did a summer exchange with an American Church. I went to Allentown Pennsylvania to a congregation of the United Church of Christ. On Saturday I went to Washington for March for the 20th Anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream speech". Next day in Church one of the deacons said to me "I hear you've been on the march for Martin Luther Coon". One of the Deacons said that to me. In the church. Reminding me that in America the most segregated hour of the week is Sunday morning. Or think of Mel Gibson "The Jews are responsible for all the war in the world." Sometimes it seems this planet isn't large enough for us

Today the world is tearing itself part because of the difficulties that different kinds of people have in living together. In Iraq we have a growing civil war between Sunni and Shi'a Moslem. In the Sudan conflict between Arab and black African. In Sri Lanka conflict between

Tamil and Singhalese. In Nigeria, in India, attacks on churches. In Pakistan shouted insults between the South African cricket team and the crowd. It's the Moslem preacher In Green Lane Mosque in Birmingham a preacher saying that Jews and Homosexuals should be killed – and not being ostracised for what he said.

Martin Luther King tells how some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was a list of possible plots for a future novel one of which was headed "a widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together". That, said King, is the great problem we face. We have inherited a large world house, in which black and white, east and west, Gentile and Jew, Protestant and Catholic, Christian and Moslem, must learn somehow to live together.

Let the Christian gospel speak. When you look to Jesus there is no rejection of anyone. Cries Paul "he has broken down a dividing wall, that is the hostility between us, so that he might create one new humanity, thus making peace".

He did it in his lifetime. In Israel there were whole classes of people who were untouchable, rejected by society – and he reached out to them. He made a hated Samaritan, a man of another race and another religion, the hero of his best loved parable. He gave women a new dignity. An African carried his cross.

The great division in the ancient world was between Jew and Greek. The effect of his life was to break it down. Paul saw what it all meant. "There is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave and freeman, male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus".

And the secret of it was quite simple. The differences between people still remained. But now there was a unity in Christ greater than anything which divided them. Says Paul "You are no longer strangers". No, now

"In Christ there is no east nor west
In him no south or North,
But one great fellowship of love,
Throughout the whole wide earth".

That may sound like rhetoric but it is also reality. For me one of the great things about being part of the church is this. That it brings me into a world-wide fellowship where there is a unity deeper than any diversity.

Let me give you an example. Let me tell you some of the people who inspired me in Christian faith. I was inspired by John Robinson who was a white English Anglican. But then I was inspired by Martin Luther King- black American Baptist, I was inspired by Harry Emerson Fosdick - white American Baptist, by Desmond Tutu - black South African Anglican, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer white German Lutheran.

Or this summer a group of us will be going to visit our twinned church Wesley Cathedral in Ghana. If you're a white Englishman Ghana can feel strange. All the colour, noise, vitality of Africa. When I grew up in Norfolk I hardly ever saw a black face, in Ghana you can find yourself the white person present. It can feel strange. But I remember last time just before we left singing

“O Thou who camest from above, the pure celestial flame
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart”.

Not strangers any longer.

Or look around in this amazing Trinity. An old member was back in Church last week. He said to me “Its different – how many nationalities are there here now?” Well not as many as I’d like. Only about 20. My latest list is: England, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Denmark, Switzerland, Jamaica, Tobago, Guyana, USA, Canada, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zambia, South Africa, Sierra Leone, India, Japan, Singapore South Korea, Sri Lanka, Fiji. If I’ve missed anywhere please tell me. The Church brings into a world-wide fellowship where people of all different kinds are one. We are no longer strangers but one.

Of course the fact is that Church sometimes lets down the gospel. As this is Christian unity week we might notice that sometimes churches who all claim to look to the Christ who makes us one sometimes exclude and reject each other.

Go to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, on the very spot where Christ was supposedly born, what do you find? The Church is divided between Greeks and Armenians - and they cannot quite agree who has which bit. Only recently there was a fight -monks pushing, shoving, hitting each other in the face.

Or look how Christians are sometimes to exclude and reject each other. Listen to this from Pat Robertson, prominent American Baptist and contender for the Republican nomination for President. “You say you’re supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists and this, that and the other thing. Nonsense. I don’t have to be nice to the Spirit of Antichrist”.

Christian Disunity is a fundamental denial of the gospel. Listen to this from Karl Barth. "There is no justification, theological, spiritual or biblical, for the existence of a plurality of churches genuinely separated and mutually excluding one another. A plurality of churches in this sense means a plurality of lords, a plurality of spirits, a plurality of Gods. There is no doubt that to the extent that Christendom does consist of actually different and opposing churches, to that extent it denies practically what it confesses theoretically the unity and singularity of God, of Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit". We are to break down divisions in the world we had better see that we living this out ourselves. After all, would you buy hair restorer from a bald-headed man?

Let the Church hear the gospel. “You are no longer strangers”. What shall we tell our children about the world they’re going to inherit? Tell them

"Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void”

Tell them the haters are going to lose. Tell them God created us one, and Christ died to keep us that way. Or as Fred Pratt Green put it:

“May we no more defend

Barriers he died to end
Give me your hand, my friend”

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