

Diversity in the modern church

An address given in London to a group of gay evangelical Christians

I heard on the news this week that to mark the arrival of Midsummer's day someone has imported several huge snowballs and deposited them at various locations in central London! They are intended to be "works of urban art", or at least so the newsreader informed me. And in a way I believe they are, though perhaps not in the way the artist intended.

Ice for me is a kind of parable of human society.

Let me explain what I mean. When God freezes water what does he make? He makes snow. Examine one of those unseasonal snowballs under the microscope and you will find it is composed of millions of tiny crystalline flakes—and (here's my point) every one of those snowflakes is different... a unique individual.

What do you get when human beings freeze water? Ice-cubes! Identical blocks of boringly homogeneous uniformity!

It's a parable of human society I say. God loves diversity. He has structured the whole universe to express the delight he takes in it. And nowhere more so than in his creation of the human race. Everyone of us is a unique individual too, and in far more complex and beautiful ways than snowflakes are. The DNA that determines our genetic characteristics seems to have been deliberately designed to produce the most extraordinary variety. Walk through London tonight and you will pass hundreds of people. With the possible exception of a rare pair of twins, none of them will be identical. They will all be different.

So why is it, tell me, that when we human beings get together in groups we are so concerned that everyone should be the same—the same as us, that is? Racism, nationalism, tribalism, sectarianism—it seems we human beings only feel safe when we are part of an undifferentiated social ice cube. We want to surround ourselves with people who think, act and talk the same as we do, and those who don't belong to our conformist club we treat with suspicion and hostility. The diversity of the snowflake seems to threaten our psychological security in some way.

What's more we've always been the same.

Do you recall the story of the Tower of Babel in the book of Genesis? It begins with the observation that "the whole world had one language" (Genesis 11:1). A harmless enough state of affairs you might have thought. But Genesis tells us that God saw in it the root of an immensely dangerous development: the promethean ambition to unite the whole of human civilisation in one monstrous mono-cultural, mono-lingual empire. The story goes on to tell us that he intervened and deliberately confused human languages to prevent that outcome. Many commentators treat this divine response as a judgement, but the text doesn't actually say that. We read that God was more anxious than angry. He knew, you see, that he had placed immense potential for evil as well as good in these human creatures who bore his image. Organised like a huge social ice-cube, the juggernaut of their technological empire could easily smash the world and themselves with it.

There is something very sinister, in fact, about the way we human beings gravitate towards uniformity. We were designed as unique snowflakes, and any social pressure that seeks to melt us down into a homogeneous ice-cube is therefore inherently dehumanising, inherently demonic.

Which is why of course the church ought to be different.

It was this very lesson the early Christians were being taught on the Day of Pentecost. Think about it! God could have miraculously given that cosmopolitan crowd in Jerusalem a single universal tongue so they could all understand what the apostles were saying. But he chose instead to distribute the gift of multi-lingualism. They all heard what Peter and the others were saying in their own tongue—

in fact the Greek word used in Acts 2 is narrower than "tongue"—it is "dialect". They all heard the gospel message, in other words, as if it was coming from someone who not only spoke their own language, but their own vernacular. It was a signal of the fact that the Holy Spirit intended to produce an unprecedented internationalism within the Church. Unlike human empires, the Church would not homogenise people into uniform ice cubes, but integrate them like snowflakes into a matrix of interlocking social diversity.

That's one of the most exciting ways in which New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation differs from Babel in the book of Genesis. Do you remember how the apostle John describes the population of heaven in that final vision of his? A single multitude, yes, but:

gathered from every tribe and kindred and nation
— and still recognisably so!

The immense diversity that characterises us human beings isn't erased in the world to come then—it is preserved. Heaven is a vast multi-cultural, multi-lingual celebration. It's the Notting Hill Carnival gone mad! We are not all going to be the same in heaven. We are all going to be different, gloriously different! And it is the social richness of that future world that we Christians are supposed to be modelling, albeit imperfectly, in our church life here and now.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is not a battery farm of clones, but a vast family of precious individuals each one loved and valued for their uniqueness.

Paul uses an important metaphor in that connection?

The body is a unit, but it is made of many parts.

He goes on to emphasise in I Corinthians 12 that all those many parts that comprise the human body are different. And those differences are essential to the unity of the body. Our limbs and organs are mutually dependent on one another. They all have different vital functions. In precisely the same way, says Paul, God builds inter-dependent diversity into the membership of Christ's church. You are like limbs and organs in the body of Christ, he says. There's no excuse for any member feeling superior, nor any reason for any member to feel inferior. For we all need one another.

In I Corinthians 12:13 he mentions two particular polarisations within Corinthian society which he believed should be dramatically affected by this:-

the racial division between Jew — Gentile and the class division between slaves and freemen.

But his main concern in the chapter is to apply his body metaphor to a third area of potential disharmony in Corinth, namely the distribution of charismatic gifts.

It's clear there was an argument going on in the Corinthian church about the relative merits of the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. Paul insists they both have a useful place in congregational life as indeed do all the other gifts of the Spirit too.

"To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

To one wisdom, to another knowledge,
to another faith, to another healing,
to another miracles, to another prophecy etc....

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines" (12:7-11)

So not only is there natural human diversity due to differences of ethnic origin (Jew and Gentile), not only is their cultural human diversity due to differences of socio-economic status (slave and free). The supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in Christians produces even more diversity due to differences of ministry in the fellowship of the Church.

You see what I mean, then, when I say God loves diversity—he just can't get enough of it!

In fact, if we expand our horizon to the whole of the New Testament we discover that the divine ambition to build community out of human diversity embraces just about every form of social distinction you can think of. Wherever we have tried to generate an exclusive "in" group, wherever we have defined a "them/us" polarisation in society, God in Christ has stepped in to demolish the walls of discrimination and prejudice we have constructed.

Here are some examples:

- race — Jew / Gentile (Acts 10:15; Ephesians 2:11-22)
- class — slave / free (I Corinthians 7:21-23; Ephesians 6:5-9)
- wealth — rich / poor (Acts 4:32-35)
- age — child / adult (Luke 18:15-17)
- sex — male / female (Luke 10:38-41; Galatians 3:28)
- physical or mental disadvantage — (Mark 5:18-20, Acts 8:26-39)
- moral respectability — (Mark 2:15-17; Luke 18:9 -14)
- charismatic gift — (I Corinthians 12:7-11)
- opinion — (I Corinthians 8:1-13; Romans 14:1-23)

Why did Jesus eat with tax-collectors and prostitutes? Because pious Jews labelled such people as "sinners" and insisted they could have no place in the coming kingdom of God. He insisted by contrast that the test of kingdom membership was simple faith in him, not moral respectability as defined by the Pharisees and their self-righteous cronies

Why did Jesus heal paralytics, lepers and the demon-possessed? Partly as an act of mercy no doubt; partly as a sign of his messianic identity no doubt; but partly too because such people were excluded from full membership within Jewish society. Rules about ritual uncleanness coupled with popular superstition and fear made outcasts of anyone who was different from the rest. By healing such people, then, Jesus was also socially rehabilitating them. It was a pointer to the fact that such illnesses, handicaps and disadvantages would constitute no barrier to membership in the new community which he was constructing.

Why did he welcome children and bless them? Because in ancient society children were grossly under-valued. He wanted to make clear that the arrogance of the adult world was misplaced. The kingdom of heaven belonged to those who were prepared to identify with children, not to those who dismissed their significance.

Why did Jesus go out of his way to affirm the women who followed him? Because women were regarded as educationally sub-normal and spiritually inferior by the male chauvinists who ruled that patriarchalist first century society. But Jesus wanted his disciples to realise that such discrimination had to stop. Thus, Mary who had chosen (in defiance of the usual protocol) to sit at his feet and listen to his teaching, just as his male disciples were doing, was not to be discouraged. Her more conventional sister Martha insisted that she should be helping with womanly work in the kitchen. But Jesus defended Mary's ambition to acquire a theological education. As Paul would later observe: male circumcision had been replaced by Christian baptism and that change of initiatory rite spelt the end of sexism in the covenant community. There is no more male and female, you are all one in Christ Jesus. He didn't mean by that of course that the physical and psychological differences between men and women were to be dissolved into some kind of asexual androgyny. Sexual diversity would remain, but just as with racial diversity, socio-economic diversity and charismatic diversity, the difference would no longer define rival human groups or form the basis of discriminatory practices and attitudes.

Some of us perhaps instinctively want to object to this radicle dismantling of all our carefully erected social barriers. "You have to draw a line somewhere, surely?" we want to say. "The Church can't be a totally inclusive society, can it! There are after all cancers as well as healthy organs in a body. And

doesn't the New Testament warn us about the dangers of such internal malignancies within the body of Christ?"

"What about heresy?" "What about sin?"

And of course, there is weight in that objection. In the gospel of Matthew we find Jesus laying down a grievance-procedure to be followed when church members fall out. In extremis, he says, you may have to exclude offensive individuals from your fellowship. And in the NT epistles, Paul, Peter and John all confirm that church discipline may sometimes require such surgery.

But even on doctrinal and moral matters that we may be inclined to regard as serious, the New Testament warns us not to engage in reckless witch-hunts.

"Those who aren't against us are for us" said Jesus to his disciples when they indignantly observed somebody healing in Jesus' name who didn't belong to their number. (Mark 9:38).

"Do all you can to maintain the unity of the Spirit," says Paul (Ephesians 4:1). In particular he counsels churches against fragmenting over petty issues that aren't central to the gospel. Christians in the early church, for instance, were divided over whether it was OK to eat meat that had been dedicated to idols in pagan temples. Conservatives among them said that to do so was a morally compromising breach of the first commandment. Liberals argued that not to do so was superstitious and an unnecessary limitation on Christian liberty. Paul was in fact a liberal on this question, but he refused to allow division over such issues of private conscience. There is plenty of room in the Church for differences of personal opinion, he said. "Let every individual Christian be fully persuaded in their own mind" and "make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification" (Romans 14, I Corinthians 8).

Most cautionary of all in this connection perhaps is Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24). He warns there of the perils of making premature moral judgements. We are neither wise enough nor good enough to be able to recognise the difference between those God will ultimately affirm and those he will ultimately condemn. So crusades to eradicate all evil in the name of Christian morality are dangerously utopian. Our inherent human fallibility means we can't reliably distinguish the wheat which God has planted from the weeds that derive from the Evil One. So Jesus' advice is to "let both grow together until the harvest". Better to tolerate some diversity of moral behaviour than to judge people too hastily and find you have unwittingly caused some of Christ's brothers and sisters to stumble as a result of your censoriousness.

I wish I could tell you that over the years the Christian church had learnt to affirm diversity in the way that the New Testament so repeatedly urges us to do. But sadly our record is very patchy in this regard.

As I look around the Christian scene, for instance, I see many churches with very clear ethnic identities. If Paul was worried that the unity of the first-century church would be fractured by the divide between Jews and Gentiles, don't we have cause to worry when we see churches for blacks and churches for whites?

If Jesus insisted that youth was not to be disparaged within the kingdom of God, should we not be concerned when we find churches effectively divided by the generation gap? The music culture that informs our worship style is of course most obvious index of that generational divide.

If Jesus affirmed Mary's desire for theological education and refused to make a Martha of her, ought we not to be concerned that so many women feel that the church is a bastion of reactionary sexist prejudice, and never more so than when a woman indicates some desire to serve Christ with her mind?

If Paul was opposed to the Corinthian church being split by controversy over spiritual gifts, should it not concern us that so many churches in the last forty years have failed to accommodate the charismatic movement without dividing over the issue?

If slave and free were to feel equally at home in the first-century church, why is it that British congregations in so many instances exhibit the snobbery associated middle class values?

If opinions about eating meat offered to idols split the conservative from the liberals in the first century church, aren't there dozens of similarly trivial issues that divide Christian denominations today?

And most pertinent to many of us—why is it that homosexuals feel so alienated from the church and from evangelical Bible-teaching churches most of all? Why are we made to feel like second-class citizens who don't really belong? Why are we intimidated into the closet for fear of being shunned? Why do many of us end up attending "gay" churches, as if we were an ethnic minority with a language problem? You will reply that the answer is that opinions differ about what kind of "difference" homosexuality represents.

Is it a genetic variant like skin colour or left-handedness?

Is it a congenital defect like Down's syndrome or cerebral palsy?

Is it a socially constructed phenomenon generated by cultural conditioning like teenage hooliganism or an Oxford accent?

Is it the result of incomplete or distorted psychosexual development like paedophilia or nymphomania?

Is it to be regarded as a kind of physical or mental illness, like leprosy or schizophrenia?

Some of course regard homosexuality as a sinful practice that should be condemned or even criminalised? They often cite the Bible in support of this opinion. But it must be remembered that the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa quoted the Bible in support of racism for many years. And American plantation owners of the last century quoted the Bible in support of slavery. And the Pharisees quoted the Bible in support of their conspiracy to crucify Jesus! The Bible is rarely quite as clear on issues as we assume it to be. Church history is full of examples of Christians reading the Bible through the filter of their preconceived ideas; and never is this more common than when we are seeking support for our prejudices.

At the very least it must surely be conceded that homosexuality has become a controversial subject within the twentieth century church. Some conservative Christians may feel strongly that it is wrong, but then first-century conservatives felt strongly that eating meat offered to idols was wrong. Conservative opinion does not always turn out to be right in such controversies. That being so, should not some leeway be given for private conscience in this area? Aren't those who wish to wield the sword of church discipline against gays in danger of over-estimating their moral infallibility and destroying wheat as well as weeds as a result of their holy crusade?

It isn't for me, or any Christian, to dictate to your conscience on this matter. But I am bound to tell you that I am now personally convinced that the intensity of the hostility those of us who are gay experience from others in the Church indicates that it is not due to simple moral conviction at all. Rather it reflects that age-old human tendency to fear people who are different. To a substantial degree it is provoked by irrational and (dare I say it?) neurotic anxiety—the same kind of neurotic anxiety that generates racism—the irrational fear of the outsider that in order to overcome its paranoid insecurity must find refuge in a them/us confrontation. But as we have seen the New Testament repeatedly seeks to disarm all such polarisations.

Homophobia in the church, I say, is one more example of the ice-cube syndrome. The conformism that simply cannot cope with diversity, and as a result quenches the Holy Spirit whenever he tries to integrate an unconventional snowflake into the people of God.