

Readings: Isaiah 6: 1-6
Luke 3: 7-18

Hymns: 83; 88; 84; 246

CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

On Thursday, I asked those who'd come to our lunchtime event if they'd share any ideas they might have for its future. I'm in my eighth year and my predecessor had built up our Thursday "Conversations" in *his* eight-year ministry at the Chapel. So, I argued, it may be time for a re-think. If anyone had any ideas, would they please either jot them down on a piece of paper or else speak to me about them.

As people left at the end of the service, it was clear they already had several bright ideas. We should certainly retain the idea, they said; the Conversations have become part of our community culture. And what about....? Then followed a number of suggestions. A clear favourite emerged. What about a Rabbi? An imam? Leaders from the Jewish and Moslem faiths? I ruminated how I'd already gone down that track at least three times over the last seven years but promised we'd give the matter our serious consideration. And so we will.

In the kind of world we live in, more and more people are realising just how ignorant we are about those who belong to other faith communities. And they want to know more. A couple of generations ago, it was Protestants who thought of Roman Catholics as people living on a different planet, strange cloven-hoofed people lost in a world of superstition, foreigners for the most part (Irish or Poles). And these coloured views of Catholics were matched by equally outrageous caricatures of us held by "the other side." But now, mercifully, much of that's changed. Why, our local Roman Catholic priest is a signed-up Heritage Steward at Wesley's Chapel and comes in every other Saturday to show guests and visitors around these premises. It's pure poetry to hear him announce to a group of Brazilians (or Americans or Germans) how God raised up John and Charles Wesley to spread scriptural holiness across this and other lands.

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But now the frontier has moved on. I don't pretend that Christians are all sorted in their view of each other. But the big questions lie beyond that particular discussion. After 2,000 years of hostility between Jews and Christians, and sixty years after the Holocaust, and with anti-semitism still rearing its ugly head across Europe, just how do we Christians address the question of the Jewish origins of our faith and the huge common agenda that exists between us? How do we move beyond caricature or exoticism or superficial comparative exercises into something more full-blooded and sensitive? How can we enjoy what the Chief Rabbi called "the dignity of difference" with total respect for each other? How can Christians affirm their Jewish fellow-citizens without turning them into conversion fodder? And how can Jews move away from mistrust and suspicion, make themselves a little more vulnerable (difficult after everything they've been through), and link arms with us gentiles in an effort to build a better world?

And how on earth do we challenge the Islamophobia that's currently raging like a disease all over the place? On the news this very morning, we've heard how Moslem leaders are expressing serious concern at the way their community is being targeted in the "war against terrorism." Anyone who shared the Eid meal at the end of Ramadan will have encountered Moslems as open, friendly and hospitable people. And yet the activities of certain Ayatollahs, the fierce exclusivism of groups like the Taliban, talk of fatwahs and jihads and the like, have fed the deepest fears in the non-Islamic world. And it's fear that breeds prejudice. And there's oodles of that around just now. On both sides.

So then, it seems perfectly reasonable to set up a series of Conversations with significant figures in the Jewish, Christian and Moslem communities. These three monotheistic faiths have increasingly in recent years made their appeal to the figure of Abraham. He is, after all, the patriarch, the father-figure, of all three faiths. Perhaps the promise that was made to him that his seed would multiply could be interpreted other than in an exclusively Jewish way. By tracing our genealogies back to him, perhaps the children of Abraham can get their relationship on to a better track. It's worth the try although, even as we think these thoughts, we should be aware of yet another voyage of discovery waiting for us when we've made progress with this one. I can see the features of Buddhists and Hindus, Confucians and animists, Shinto and Jain, waiting in the wings. And beyond them, the world

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of non-belief. We've a long, long way to travel if we're committed to working for a world that respects difference, where people learn from each other, whether there are treasures currently unheard of that lie *beyond* difference. But, we can't address the whole of that agenda this morning. The children of Abraham are as far as we can go for now.

And there's something we should be very wary of. The very words "children of Abraham," whilst offering us a very convenient tag to define and describe the people who might have lots of stuff in common which they can talk about, can itself become a piece of meaningless jargon if we're not careful. Inappropriately used, it will become a phrase that has more to do with political correctness than community relations. Like other phrases we can think of. Just trace the vocabulary we've used to describe disabled people, for example. They were cripples, handicapped, disabled, challenged as we sought ever gentler words. But we continued to speak of them in the third person, asked if they liked sugar, forgot to think of them as people (preferring to keep them within categories we could more easily cope with). And the same will happen to the useful phrase, "the children of Abraham," if we don't pay due heed.

And it's not anachronistic to suggest that this is precisely what John the Baptist is most worried about. He draws a large audience. He's a superstar, a charismatic preacher, an eccentric, a compellingly authentic voice. But, in his sermons, he didn't seem very indulgent to his listeners. He clearly spots hypocrisy a mile off. And he obviously can't stand people parading their pedigrees, appealing to their ancestors, standing on the correctness of their descent. "We have Abraham as our father" isn't a good enough line of self-justification, it won't do as a visiting card, there has to be something just a little deeper than that. John the Baptist is looking for evidence that proves the sincerity of his audience. Lives need to be changed, they have to become fruitful, they must carry meaning. What on earth is repentance all about if it isn't related to a change of attitude, bearing, understanding? Just to appeal to your status as children of Abraham without such change is to appeal to an empty formula.

This is a truth that our young people have been wrestling with. They've been looking at homelessness, a word we see easily bandy around, a word we've

become thoroughly familiar with. But how easily we dissociate it from the people who are actually homeless, we depersonalise it, empty it of human content. So homelessness becomes a problem, an item on our political agenda, a social phenomenon, something we have attitudes about. And we forget that it's a word that describes the plight of people, real people, people like you and me, people who jump if you pinch them, bleed if you wound them, cry if you hurt them. They mustn't be turned into statistics, types, problems. We have to find ways of dealing with them as people. Like they do at our Whitechapel Mission, or our West London Day Centre, or in Crisis (at Christmas), or Shelter. Jon's mum (in a drama being rehearsed by our young people this morning for putting on next Sunday) ends up by seeing this very clearly. She admits as much to her son who's brought home a lad who's been sleeping rough on the streets: "I apologize for never trusting you with your friend," she says, "it was me being stereotypical. I am sorry. Perhaps Gavin can stay after all for dinner." She had to move through the labels and the stereotypes and the generalisations to see Gavin as the boy he was, as real a bundle of flesh and blood as her own son Jon. It's when we see each other as people that miracles can begin to happen.

For the poor unsuspecting types who made up John the Baptist's congregation, this was a hard lesson to learn. He just wasn't impressed by their WHO'S WHO or Debrett's entry. Social standing or the right connections didn't count for much with him. "You brood of vipers," he railed, "who warned you to escape the wrath to come. Don't Abraham's-my-father me! If you're climbing *that* greasy pole then let me tell you something. The axeman's about and he's about to aim his axe at the very pole you're climbing. Here's the deal, you guys. If you're a tax collector, do your work honestly. Treat the people you deal with like, well, like human beings. And if you're a soldier, don't throw your weight around, don't abuse your authority. Indeed, whatever you are, do your work with integrity and treat other people properly. If you're a shop assistant....." No, he didn't mention shop assistants, it's just that I've had some bad experiences lately!

Last night on television, we heard the result of the Big Read competition and now we know that the most popular book of all time is *Lord of the Rings*. Rubbish! I demand a recount. *Pride and Prejudice*, which came second, is by far the better book. And what a wonderfully subtle book! It explores the

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nuances and intricacies of the most perfidious class system ever invented, the English one. Two young people, Elizabeth and Darcy, are destined by social convention to live their lives in separate zones. As the tale unfolds, Elizabeth abandons her prejudice and Darcy's pride melts and the two of them meet each other as human beings. It's told in a wonderfully consummate way and is my recommended reading for anyone in a time of stress or distress.

It's only when people get to know each other as human beings that they truly meet. And only when people meet, across labels and barriers and prejudice, does the kingdom of God come to pass. Only then can their lives bear fruit. And that's the path we've been asked to follow.

God help us.

Amen.