



Sermon: 'Shaped by overcoming difference'

Shan Rush (Sunday 26 March 2023)

Acts, 15: 1-2, 6-13, 19-20. John, 4: 19-26

It is natural to be drawn to people who are like us, people similar in age, in gender, in educational attainment or political outlook. But the kingdom of God isn't like that. If you look at the image on the slide, you might recognise a group of individuals from different cultures alongside one another who feature in our Te Deum window. Sometimes we are in situations where we encounter people who are very different to us. When I was exploring whether I had a vocation to the Priesthood, one of the things I clearly remember being told was that before I was immersed in an environment where I would encounter a wide range of ordinands from differing traditions, each of whom would have their own viewpoints and perspectives, I needed to have a clearer understanding of my own spirituality and a broader understanding of other traditions. At that stage, I had limited experience of the diversity of the Anglican Church, having only worshipped in one church as an adult. My perspective was narrow and single minded and the concern was that as I encountered a more diverse group of people, initially in training, but later in the communities I would serve, that I would not be equipped to deal with any conflicts that might arise as a result of me potentially wrongly interpreting or judging others solely through the lens of my own culture and experience.

To help me with this, I was encouraged to visit some churches of a different tradition to my own, and then to undertake a placement to explore and reflect on the similarities and differences I encountered. I decided to do my placement in an evangelical church which operated on a city wide rather than parish based model of mission and ministry. For me, it was a challenging experience. I went into it anxious that I would have nothing in common with the people I was about to meet and wondering how I would cope with the whole experience. A couple of things I experienced still stick in my mind today, one was the way in which healing ministry was conducted and the other related to the administration of Communion, especially what happens to any remaining consecrated bread and wine. I'd always been taught that unless it was being reserved for the communion of persons not

present such as those who are sick or housebound, what remained should be consumed at the end of the distribution, or immediately after The Dismissal of the Community. I was therefore surprised to see large amounts of bread being left on cafe style tables after the service, some used to make a meal, and upset when I discovered that what remained was later thrown out or fed to the birds! I'd accepted that across the Anglican Church people hold different models about what "actually" happens in the Eucharist, but I had no idea that we differed so greatly in our practice. I was fortunate to have a good supervisor I could talk to and discuss my experiences. We began our conversations by acknowledge the differences I'd observed, and then explored both the theology and the practicalities behind what was being done. Being open in dialogue rather than defensive and sharing information helped me build knowledge and skills in many different ways. It wasn't always comfortable. We did not always agree but through talking face-to-face, asking the questions that mattered and really listening to the answers, both of us grew in understanding. Becoming acquainted with people and practices outside my usual comfort zone broadened my perspective and lessened my anxieties. Uneasy relationships from which I could easily have chosen to leave, evolved into appreciative relationships through discovering similarities and sharing experiences. Through having a conversation instead of solely being told what was true or false, my point of view was heard as well as my supervisors. It wasn't a case of being right or wrong, it was about our differences being valued and respected.

If only these principles could be applied so easily in other situations we encounter. There's a quotation from Willie James Jennings in the Lent course which reads: "The single greatest challenge for disciples of Jesus is to imagine and then enact actual living together...It has been easier to imagine either loss or resistance – loss of difference through assimilation, or resistance to its loss through segregation. How can peoples be joined together without loss, without the loss of one people's ways for the sake of the other?"

The name Barnabas means "son of encouragement," and Barnabas built a bridge between Saul and other Christians who were afraid of him, vouching for the reality of his faith and ministry. They travelled together, doing the thing they had in common, preaching the gospel. When they encountered opposition from the Pharisees who believed it was necessary to be circumcised in order to follow Christ, they stood together. The Pharisees were suggesting, "In order to become a Christian, you must first become a Jew. Unless you become a Jew, you are a second-class Christian, if a Christian at all." Thus they challenged the gospel of the grace of God, as Paul and Barnabas had been proclaiming it. This led to them going to Jerusalem to settle the debate. Paul, who had been stripped of his own Jewish prejudices and had the love of God revealed to him personally and who had encountered it again through meeting Cornelius, puts forward that circumcision is not the thing that makes you a Christian, but knowing the grace of Jesus. Barnabas and Paul give an account of the signs and wonders that have happened in their ministry, their testimony of experience. These testimonies of the Holy Spirit's actions beyond the Jewish community bear witness to God at work within and among the uncircumcised. Paul and Barnabas did not always agree on

things. Indeed, later on in Acts we learn a disagreement led to them going their separate ways. Was this a negative thing to do? In doing so, they reached a wider number of people. Sometimes a way forward comes through the realisation that long-standing differences are not necessarily defining differences. Early believers taught various, sometimes contradictory things, and they argued with each other. When they achieved a consensus, it was only after a process that took time and required input from multiple voices. By means of scripture, experience, and a long conversation about them both, God offers the light needed for the church as a whole.

Rather than focus on the bigger topics of human sexuality, marriage etc. that face the Church of England today, and which Anne included in her sermon last week, I thought I'd consider something more local – our mission area. On March 16th 2021, the arrangement between St John's, St Mary's and St Mark's was formalised when Matthew and Sue were licensed as oversight ministers by Bishop Sophie. Initially little changed. As we began to worship back in the buildings, we committed to working together to ensure St Mary's had a regular service of Holy Communion. The 3 churches tried to unite for a couple of acts of worship together but few people other than those who already worshipped in the host church attended. Each congregation was focused on ensuring that life continued as it had done prior to us starting to work together and it felt as though no one wanted to have to "give up" an act of worship. Undertaking the Living in Love and Faith Course together saw a few people accessing a course facilitated by someone outside their church and, with all 3 churches agreeing to use the same course, there is a bit of mixing at Lent groups. A month ago, a small group of clergy and laity from all 3 churches got together in the same room. We began by introducing ourselves and the hopes and expectations we came with. Everyone listened respectfully and it felt a safe space in which to share the reality and challenges each church was facing. This revealed vulnerabilities and fears alongside more positive examples of what was valued and affirmed as well as visions for the future. Something shifted. Instead of being defensive, there was a willingness to engage and to try to build bridges that cross our differences and which help us to connect our similarities and discover the principles we have in common. The main things that became very clear and offered a platform on which we can move forward was that each of us places importance on having a Eucharist in our building each week, wants to retain our own sense of identity AND wants to share both resources and in activities where we can. Identifying what is life-giving for each church, clear communication that enabled each church to express their limits and perspectives as well as to hear others and acknowledging that we are still a young mission area in a period of transition was valuable. We may well have our disagreements but we want to support one another in our ministry and mission and all 3 churches now pray for one another regularly. Difference does not have to be a threat or a source of danger. Our church communities are called to be a herald and foretaste of God's kingdom, diverse in every way imaginable. We know that our own biases and prejudices can sometimes get in the way of our ability to see the humanity in others. We know that it takes hard work and humility to truly listen to those whose experiences and perspectives are different from our own.

The good news is that being shaped by difference can be a powerful force for growth and transformation in our lives. When we open ourselves up to the perspectives and experiences of others, we create space for grace and understanding to flourish. We begin to see the beauty in diversity, and the richness of the many cultures and traditions that make up our world. Moreover, being shaped by difference can also help us to overcome our own limitations and blind spots. When we encounter people who think and act differently from us, we are encouraged to re-examine our own assumptions and values, and to ask ourselves the hard questions that lead to true self-reflection. So let us embrace the diversity of the world around us, and allow ourselves to be shaped by the differences that we encounter. Let us seek out experiences and relationships that challenge us, that open our hearts and minds to new possibilities. Let us remember that God's love is not limited by our human categories and divisions, but encompasses all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or any other factor.

As we go forth from this place, may our lives be shaped by the love of Christ, which transcends all human boundaries and unites us in one family of faith. And may we never forget that we are all created in the image of God, and called to love and serve one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.