

Embracing the other

Isaiah 42:10-20
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 7:24-29

The death and resurrection of Jesus, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit upon the early church was turn race relations around. A surprised Saint Peter, called to visit the home of the Gentile centurion Cornelius, was to exclaim “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.” Saint Paul, who described himself as a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” wrote to the Galatian church to say “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In the past week or two we have been challenged once again around race relations: the cruel and unnecessary death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on the 25th of May, the resulting Black Lives Matter movement and protest action, and then the things that have been said and the actions that have been taken in response to the movement and protests, have all been deeply troubling.

Reflection on this and the issues it raises has brought back to my mind an excellent book published almost a quarter of a century ago in which the following statement is made:

“It may not be too much to claim that the future of our world will depend on how we deal with identity and difference. The issue is urgent.”¹

The author is Miroslav Volf. He is a professor of theology at Yale. Growing up in a Pentecostal Christian family in Croatia and then Serbia, he knew what it was to be a member of a tiny religious minority. In his adult life he was also profoundly shaped by the violent ethnic conflict between Croats and Serbs that occurred in his homeland following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. He is well qualified to comment on the impact of human difference.

¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation*, Abingdon, 1996. p.20

In his excellent and highly regarded book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Volf describes the key problem and sin in human relationships as being the offence of “exclusion”, which occurs when we make people objects and remove them from ourselves as entirely other, entirely different, entirely separate. Exclusion occurs when we try to expel, assimilate, oppress, or abandon the other.

Volf contrasts the sin of exclusion to the activity of making space for others within ourselves; he says:

the will to give ourselves to others and “welcome” them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity.²

Volf uses the metaphor of embrace for a multi-step process of welcoming, waiting, receiving, loving and releasing others in an offering that demands nothing but hopes for real love.

To embrace we first open our arms. This expresses our wish for the encounter with the other, and it creates space for the other to come into. Open arms are a gesture of invitation.

Second, the open arms wait. One person awaits the response of the other.

Embrace is not an act of invasion.

Next, the open arms close around the other. One is both holding and held: it is a reciprocal action. It involves gentleness: this is no act of power; there is no crushing, no attempt to assimilate the other.

Finally, the arms open again. Embrace is not about making two bodies one: each retains their individuality, and is then free to initiate the process from the start again.³

Part of true embrace and love is that we accept and embrace others even when we don't understand them, and possibly even when they have hurt us. In this we make ourselves vulnerable to being hurt – even being hurt again by someone who has wronged us – but this vulnerability is essential to true trusting relationships. This sort

² Volf p.29

³ See Volf pp.141-145.

of vulnerability is modelled on God. In the passage from Isaiah, we see that God called out Israel as his servant people. But they are an imperfect people, constantly falling short of their role in the covenant with God: “Who is blind like the one in covenant with me, blind like the servant of the Lord?”, God asks through his prophet. Nevertheless, God still calls and sends them even while they are still sinful. Volf says

at the core of the Christian faith lies the persuasion that the “others” need not be perceived as innocent in order to be loved, but ought to be embraced even when they are perceived as wrongdoers.⁴

Today, under Alert Level 1 rules, we are permitted once again to exchange the Peace with one another. The Peace is liturgically a time when we take hold of the truth that we come to the table of the Lord a reconciled people, reconciled to one another and to God through the work of Christ on the cross; and the Peace is a time when we might do something of that reconciling work if we need to put ourselves right with someone else in the congregation. We say “Peace be with you” because we want peace – not merely the absence of conflict, but *shalom*, wholeness of relationships – with God, within oneself, with one another, and with the world around.

Today, under Alert Level 1 rules, we are permitted once again to exchange the Peace with one another, to shake hands, to *embrace*. Let our ability to undertake that physical interaction today, in the midst of renewed racial tension, be a profound symbol of our making room in our lives for others who are different from us.

This metaphor of embrace is pertinent today, which we celebrate as Te Pouhere Sunday. Today is a day set apart to celebrate part of what defines us, the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. “Te Pouhere” is the term used to refer to the Constitution of our church.

⁴ Volf p.85.

The original Constitution of the Anglican Church in New Zealand was dated 1857, and was drafted by Bishop Selwyn. It contained features that at the time were far reaching and distinctive, the Church seeking to be responsive to the particular needs of the time and place in which it found itself, while still honouring its heritage and maintaining its family links to the worldwide Anglican family.

But this 1857 Constitution was unfortunately, too, a product of its time. Little was made of the needs of the Maori Church, which was represented by five senior C.M.S. missionaries at the convention that adopted the Constitution. The Maori church, Te Hāhi Mihinare, would decline alarmingly in the years to follow the signing of the Constitution.

Nearly seventy years later, in 1925, a Commission recommended the establishment of a separate Maori diocese, but the North Island bishops refused to consecrate a bishop of Maori race. The next General Synod agreed to have a Maori bishop as assistant to the Bishop of Waiapu. Frederick Bennett was appointed. But Bennett had to negotiate the right to enter any other diocese. Isn't that extraordinary: here he was, appointed as bishop to the Maori church, and yet not able to minister throughout the whole of it!

An example of the strained relationship happened when 100 confirmation candidates from the Maori Battalion training camp near Kaikohe had to be taken by bus to Rotorua because Bishop Simkin of Auckland refused to allow Bishop Bennett to work in his diocese. These were people who were about to enter into a significant commitment, risking life and limb in military service to their country – and yet their access to confirmation was being contested by church authorities! It appeared that episcopal power and territorial control were regarded as being more important than Christian nurture of all believers.⁵

At last in 1992 a new Constitution was adopted. This provided for what is known as the “three Tikanga model” in which each *Tikanga* (or cultural approach) – Maori, Pakeha, and Polynesia – has an equal place. Each has considerable freedom to

⁵ Dawson 103, slightly adapted

organise its own life and to express itself in culturally helpful ways, while preserving the essential unity of the whole. Mutual interdependence exists between the Tikanga, and this mutual interdependence occurs in the context of a covenant relationship.

As an expression of this covenant relationship we have three co-presiding archbishops: currently Philip Richardson (Tikanga Pakeha), Don Tamihere (Maori), and Fereimi Cama (Polynesia). After initial concerns about this approach being some kind of three-headed monster, our successive groups of co-presiding archbishops have shown considerable grace and wisdom in the way they have worked to demonstrate our fundamental unity. It sounds quite Trinitarian, doesn't it?

As part of the outworking of the 1992 Constitution a great deal of work has been done, and continues, to find ways of fairly sharing the resources of the Church – for example, trust funds. This kind of work can be difficult: it is true that we can all get rather attached to *our* things, isn't it?

It seems to me that in order to develop and maintain this approach to the constitutional arrangements for our church each party has had to exhibit the qualities of embrace: in order to embrace, each party has to open their arms to make space for the other; and while embracing each party is united to the other, but still remains distinct. There is an important principle here: to embrace, to love, to become united, requires giving something up, making room in our life for one another.

As I said, the Constitution is known as Te Pouhere. "Pouhere" is the Maori word for constitution. The "pouhere" is literally a hitching post, the place where people tie up their waka. The idea is that the Constitution forms the common hitching post, to which are tied the three large waka of Tikanga Pakeha, Maori, and Pasifika.

But let us always remember that there is a hitching post which is vastly more important and lasting than Te Pouhere, our Anglican constitution: it is Christ. It is to

Christ that we owe our ultimate allegiance; it is loyalty to Christ that ultimately matters. Any other thing by which we might try to define ourselves, any other thing that gives us stability and arranges our life together, *any* other thing must be regarded as secondary and capable of change. Peter's decision to baptise the household of Cornelius was an example of the "rules" having to change in order to catch up with what God was already doing. Our rules, our constitutions and so on, need to be capable of change: it is only our being in Christ Jesus that is primary and permanent. Or to use the metaphor of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, we build ourselves on the firm foundation which is hearing Jesus' words and putting them into practice.

Circumstances will change. The Church – wherever we look around the world or in New Zealand, in whatever denomination or expression – is having to undergo change. The world has changed, and some of what once worked works no longer. And that can be scary as we come to recognize that the stability of the institution defined in our *Pouhere* might need to give way to a more flexible and potentially fragile form as we seek to heed God's call to what is right and needful in this season.

So we hitch ourselves firmly to Christ, we stand on the firm foundation of his words and practice; and we obey his call to be vulnerable and open to others, symbolised in embrace, as we bear his love to all of humankind.

Works consulted

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