

The Church is a new vision = unity in diversity.

Some of you may have heard of Jim Wallis. Not the chap who heads up the Australian Christian Lobby but the American evangelical minister who is highly critical of right wing politics and fundamentalism. He edits the sojourners magazine, which is a Christian publication with a social justice focus. In the book "The Call to Conversion" he has this testimony. "When I was a university student, I was unsuccessfully evangelized by almost every Christian group on campus. My basic response to their preaching was, "How can I believe when I look at the way the church lives?" They answered, "Don't look at the church, look at Jesus." I now believe that statement is one of the saddest in the history of the church. ...People should be able to look at the way we live and begin to understand what the gospel is about."

Each Sunday we gather in this place of worship. We are called together and have much in common, not the least our commitment to the way of Christ. We also meet in each other's homes and at other places and we identify with the larger Anglican Church and the worldwide church. We are both the local gathered community and part of the universal church. In this season of epiphany we have been asking the question, "Who is Jesus?" Today I want to turn the focus onto the church, the gathered community of Christ followers. We need to ask the questions and create our community so when people look at the way we live they will begin to understand what the gospel is about.

What then should the church be? What principles and values must it live by to truly reflect Christ? This is a huge question so this sermon will be a two parter. You will need to come back next week to hear the finish. Today I want to highlight the core of it all as I have come to understand it.

The first thing to say is that although the Christian community has been around for a couple of thousand years it is a radical new vision. In fact it is still so new that we Christians keep getting it wrong and other people keep getting us wrong. By way of explanation I'd like to put our first and second readings side by side.

The first reading from the Book of Nehemiah is the story of a gathered community. They are the exiles who have returned from Persia and under the direction of Nehemiah, the governor, they have rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem in 52 days. Nehemiah and the other leaders then called together all the people and had Ezra read from the Book of Moses, the Law. After hearing the words, which apparently took about 6 hours, they

pledged themselves to observe its commands. This gathered community committed themselves anew to following the Law as it was laid down in their scriptures.

The dominant characteristic of the ancient Hebrews were that they defined themselves over and against other peoples as a Holy people who all followed the same law and worshipped the same God. Their unity and prosperity were obtained through conformity – to the community values and the written law. Theirs was a tribal mindset. Their identity was ethnic, their boundaries real and physical (they had just rebuilt the walls) and they had a common language and believed in a common ancestor. Perhaps compared to the polytheistic nature religions that surrounded them they were not totally tribal but in terms of how each person found their place, purpose and meaning the tribe was central. Non-conformity to the rules and values of the group was punishable by death. You just have to read Leviticus to become aware of the penalty for stepping outside the parameters. Yet, we must not think of them as oppressed by this system. They were not 21st century human beings. The tribe was what they knew and understood, flourished in and honoured.

If we turn to the reading from Corinthians we find a very different picture. It is so different that even today we can sometimes still not quite get it. Paul's picture of the gathered community is a new vision. His letter to the Corinthians was crafted to deal with questions about identity and disunity. The Corinth church was wildly diverse. It had slaves and wealthy slave owners, Jews and gentiles, Romans and Greeks, men and women and young and old. It also seems to have had an abundance of the Spiritual gifts. Into this confusing mix Paul paints for his listeners the picture of how a Christian community should look if they truly understood what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished for those who commit to his way.

And the picture is not tribal. It is of a group of diverse individuals who come together to build each other up and work for God's vision and mission. It is primarily characterized by the Holy Spirit who empowers and animates everyone. At verse 12.13 it says, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into the one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit". This is the same Spirit who Jesus believed empowered him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. This same Spirit is with and in us today. Participation in this community is not through ethnic identity or tribal affiliation, although for many Christians that is part of their story. It is ultimately through the free choice to follow Christ and join with others in carrying on his mission. And we

are united, strengthened and empowered for this mission by the Spirit of God.

And the health, wholeness and unity of the Church is only truly possible when diversity of background, ethnicity, sexuality, gender and ability is embraced and honoured. It should never be required that membership of the Christian community is attained by giving up one's individuality or particularity. Rather individuality and the journey towards that should be central to our life together. Each one of us is called into relationship with God, through Christ. Each one of us has a very valuable and particular journey and contribution to make in the working out of Christ's mission – and we all need each other.

As your parish priest I am not particularly interested in whether you believe the words of the Nicene Creed or where you stand with any of the doctrines of the church. Some days I'm not too sure about the creed myself and I take comfort from the fact that when we say it we are saying it on behalf of the whole church. I am more interested in whether your doubts and struggles with the creed are distancing you from God, the source of your life. I am more concerned with you finding your particular gifts and path, not with you conforming to a set of propositions or indeed conforming to anything. It is vastly more important to follow the Christ with body, mind and soul than it is to bend the knee to anything else. For in following Christ, freedom, peace and justice become possible.

I was astonished recently to read this headline in a Times magazine. *“As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God”* The tagline is even more pointed: *“Missionaries, not aid money, are the solution to Africa's biggest problem – the crushing passivity of the people's mindset.* The atheist is Matthew Parris, who is a journalist and former Member of Parliament. He is obviously not your typical atheist. So what led Parris to his surprising conclusion? (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/matthew_parris/article5400568.ece)

Parris grew up in Africa, and returned recently to do a Times article on Pump Aid, a nongovernmental development organization. Pump Aid, helps provide clean water to rural communities. The organization is secular, but several of its African representatives are devoted followers of Jesus. This is what Parris had to say: “Traveling in Malawi refreshed [a] belief ... I've been trying to banish all my life, but an observation I've been unable to avoid since my African childhood. It confounds my ideological beliefs, stubbornly refuses

to fit my worldview, and has embarrassed my growing belief that there is no God. Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. The Christians were always different." Their faith seemed to have "liberated and relaxed them." Parris goes on to bemoan tribalism for fostering an attitude of fear and "exaggerated respect for a swaggering leader." He credits Christianity's emphasis on a direct, personal relationship with God for encouraging an individuality that can help cast off what he calls a crushing tribal groupthink. He believes that is why and how it liberates.

Parris's words echo what I discovered through my research into community development in the Philippines. Belief in and commitment to Jesus Christ, the direct relationship he makes possible with God, transforms human hearts and therefore transforms communities. Somehow Christianity breaks through the traditional collective mindset. This should be no surprise. Jesus overturned temple tables and blasted religious leaders for supplanting God's ways with their own. Over the centuries religious leaders have continued to do just that. We have fallen back into a tribal mindset, again and again. We do it in our society again and again. We have idolized the traditions of our fathers and mothers rather than honoured the God who Jesus reveals and we have imposed those idolized traditions on to others.

Thank heavens we had a reformation, an enlightenment and all those other things that have made the church rediscover its roots and the vision of the Gospel. Thank heavens we are a reforming church, open to God's Spirit, open to diversity and individuality, open to conflict and disagreement, a church without boundaries but in the one Spirit - for we are a community of believers who find our individual paths together.

And we do need community. Nowhere in Paul's new vision is the community dispensed with. Nowhere is the least under valued, the eccentric shunned, the strong allowed to dominate. It was Bonhoeffer who out of all early 20th century theologians spoke most strongly about the centrality of community. He believed that concrete I-Thou relations between persons, including relation to the divine Thou, could occur only within the framework of community – not the tribe – but the freely chosen community. There is something inherently transformative about the Christian community. Bonhoeffer was of course deeply concerned with freedom and liberation so it is no surprise that part of his work and ministry involved the black churches of America. One of the ironies of history is that African slaves in America were indoctrinated in the religion

of their masters, yet discovered the true, liberative meaning of the gospel in their underground churches. Here they gathered secretly to sing, pray, shout, preach and read. Here a transformation happened. From being slaves they became a singing, resistant, hopeful people. They found their identity, courage and strength.

You know I am not particularly enamoured of the church at times and I am talking here of the “Church”, not this local gathered community. I have much sympathy with atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. Heaven only knows the pain and suffering that well-meaning Christians have caused over the centuries. And we in the place know the tensions and difficulties of living a life of faith together. Yet I have come to know the joy and love of a life lived in Christian community. I have seen the power of Christ’s Spirit working in people’s lives, transforming relationships and reality itself. I have come to see that the challenge of our difference and diversity, our very individuality, saves us from ourselves. It is when I am confronted by something in the other, what they say or do, that I come face to face with myself and where I need to die to my self-will, my old attitudes and ways. It is where I am brought into wholeness and new life with others. This is not easy... In many ways it is inexplicable but very precious. Next week I want to talk about how we nurture and protect our unity in diversity. How we make room for that necessary freedom and how we live into that new vision and how we continue Christ’s mission. So stay tuned! Let’s just pray for a moment....