

## Seventh Sunday after Epiphany 2017

Mick Jagger reportedly wrote an autobiography in the early eighties, though apparently he can't recall doing it! In his memoir he recalls returning home to suburban Dartford in Kent after the Stones first concert tours. These had been widely reported as being marked by mayhem, chaos, debauchery, riots and goodness knows what else. And his mother's horrified response when he stepped indoors..... 'O Michael, your hair!'

He is of course now 'Sir Mick' and the man who penned 'Sympathy for the Devil' in more recent times wrote these words:

Oh joy love you bring  
Oh joy make my heart sing

And I drove across the desert  
I was in my four wheel drive  
I was looking for the Buddha  
And I saw Jesus Christ

He smiled and shrugged his shoulder  
And lit a cigarette  
Said jump for joy  
Make some noise  
Remember what I said

My soul is a like a ruby  
And I threw it in the earth  
But now my hands are bleeding  
From scrabbling in the dirt  
And I look up to the heavens  
And a light is on my face  
I never never never  
Thought I'd find a state of grace.

I have been considering this week how we easy it is to be superficial about things, like Mick's mum worrying about his hair. Our debates about culture and multi culturalism seem endless and get us nowhere except greater misunderstanding and prejudice; they are marked by superficiality, a complete disregard for history and an ignorance of the development, the transformation of culture. Those of you of my parent's generation probably thought the world would end with the advent of the Rolling Stones and yet the world goes on, Mick becomes Sir Mick and he pens these remarkable lyrics. I bet the parents of the sixties thought that Mick would never find a state of grace, let alone their children influenced by him.

Many of you, I know, have lived and worked in other countries, countries which suffer with extreme poverty, violence, political unrest and all manner of deprivation. How we assist these nations remains a perennial problem. I recall vividly my own arrival in Afghanistan, it was cold, my accommodation was like nothing I'd ever experienced, the safety protocols restricted my movements, let alone my body armour. But these changes paled into insignificance when I experienced the living standards of the locals and the culture they lived in.

Afghanistan is a tribal place; it is almost a misnomer to call it a nation. The locals that I met and worked alongside were all fiercely partisan. Their allegiances lay with their tribe; if they thought of themselves as Afghans it was secondary. They live an 'honour culture' the most important thing they have is their honour, the honour of their family and their tribe, it was to be protected at all costs. An eye for an eye is a fundamental element of this culture. So if the honour of an individual, tribe or family is besmirched in any way it must be regained by retribution. If there is a failure to gain satisfaction then a blood feud can develop and these can become intergenerational. The idea of an eye for an eye developed from the need to limit retaliation; without a limit even a minor breach of a person's honour can escalate into all out war.

I was the Chaplain to 750 military mentors and their support network, it was crucial for us to understand these and many other cultural issues to enable us to be competent mentors; but we also had to be counter-cultural. The Terms of Engagement under which we operated upheld the principle that retribution was not acceptable; revenge has no place in warfare. In this regard we followed the teaching of Confucius 'Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.' This was an idea alien to the soldiers we were mentoring; but it had to be part of our narrative. We were also involved in building schools and medical centres predominantly for women and girls and we trained their tradesmen to build, and their soldiers to defend them, but we could sense the cultural uncertainty let alone the fear of Taliban reprisals. It had to be part of our narrative, despite seemingly running counter to deeply held cultural norms.

It was a way of life much like that of Biblical times. These were cultural norms that Jesus too turns upside down... you have heard it said.... but I say! If someone belts you on the right cheek give them the left, don't seek revenge. Jesus show no partisanship between tribes, and nations, and peoples. We questioned ourselves whilst we were in Afghanistan, are we not imposing our culture on these folk? Is it right that we adopt a stance that could be deemed as counter cultural? But Jesus did it, didn't he? And what about our dealings with our indigenous folk of our own nation; every year large teams of troops are deployed to remote Aboriginal communities to build schools, community and medical centres. Is this the right way to deal with folk whose culture is different to ours? The servicemen and women I spoke to often came with doubts: are we wasting our time, is this patronising? But in the military ours was, and is, a mission of patience and perseverance, we were but a small part of ongoing missions with the potential to last for decades. This is our mission too.

Jesus was explicit that he had not come to change or abolish, but to fulfil. Our response must be the same. If we look superficially at the cultures and peoples with whom we share this world and this country we will see only difference and we know where that leads. Jesus engaged, he talked with people, his was a ministry of dialogue. He didn't change the culture though, but he laid the foundations that generations have been building on ever since. Yes we must speak out where gross injustices are committed in the name of culture, but we must also recognise that deeply held cultural beliefs often have at their heart concern for others, for community and relationship. The laws in Leviticus have at their heart the safety and well-being of all, although they seem arcane to us today. Despite the cultural divide my time in Afghanistan taught me much about resilience, faith, relationships and community, things we don't always do well. Our mission in the church then is not to bring goodness to bear, to bring God to bear but to help discover where God is already, and make it known, transform what is already there! Not abolish but fulfil.

This may seem impossible, haven't we already tried this? Yes we have, and we must continue to build on foundations laid for us. It is slow work, but try we must; we might think that we will never never never find a state of grace, but our calling is to transform culture, not see it always as inherently evil, not look superficially, but engage, and find God within it, this is our calling.