

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 10 September 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

Ezekiel 33:7-11, Psalm 119:33-40, Romans 13:1-10, Matthew 18:10-20

We are in the midst of the first sitting of the 48th Synod of the Diocese. We gathered on Friday evening for the Presidential Address and Synod Eucharist. The address was wide ranging, at one point the Bishop quoted from the work of the Canadian philosopher and writer Charles Taylor, on the subject of recognition. Taylor outlines two versions of recognition that have developed in Western culture. The first version focuses on equality, we recognise what we share with every human being. The second version focusses on difference, we recognise that others are different from us. The Bishop of course was speaking in the context of the forthcoming Referendum concerning the recognition of indigenous people in our constitution. But this idea of recognition also applies to us in the Church.

The Synod chamber, not surprisingly, is *not* a room full of the like-minded. Our tradition within the wider Church is one that celebrates diversity and has done so since the very earliest times. Emerging from the turmoil of the Reformation and the tragic years during the reigns of the Protestant Edward VI and the Roman Catholic Mary I, the Elizabethan settlement endeavoured to create an environment where a *comprehensive* Church could emerge. A Church where, rather than being like-minded, we were like-faithed. A Church where we share in fundamentals but sit more lightly with such things that perhaps are best understood as matters of conscience. 'I have no desire to make windows into men's souls', Elizabeth I is reported to have said.

This matter of recognition presents us with a challenge what will our focus be equality or difference. Both have some merit but at its heart the referendum question should concern the recognition of our common humanity whilst similarly the matter of recognition in the Church should concern our common faith – we are made in the image of God. The matter of difference in both: whether it be culture, colour, language, ability, gifts, theology etc are secondary.

As you can imagine perhaps, Susan and I have been reminiscing this past week on ministry over these past twenty-five years; both the uniqueness and the sameness of the communities and the characters that we have got to know. After time serving the Cathedral community in Wangaratta as student in residence, the Bishop, in his wisdom, decided to send me away from the Cathedra, and the rarified atmosphere of fine Cathedral worship to a rural parish with five small centres which were spread along a broad valley from the outskirts of the city to a community some 50kms away. I was to minister to this community along with a newly ordained part time priest. I recall when he introduced us to a gathering of the parish, we looked out over a congregation of what I thought then, were very elderly folk and he addressed us, quoting from Paul's first letter to Timothy 'Let no one despise you for your youth.' Some were not listening!

It was wonderful country, fertile and abundant, and we were welcomed warmly by many. But when the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote glowingly in his diary about small churches in rural communities, he admitted that some are 'small and mean.' He was right. In one centre, a tiny church that could only be accessed in dry weather, a church dedicated to St Matthew, there were four members, two couples. Two brothers married to two sisters. They would sit on opposite sides of the aisle, they would never speak or acknowledge each other, even for the greeting peace. Indeed during the peace they would make point of ignoring each other. These couples looked eerily alike, they dressed and spoke alike, they shared so much and yet they would not recognise this. They simply dwelt on that which separated them, I presumed some age-old feud. I found it almost possible to engage with them meaningfully, indeed I couldn't and as for trying to preach...well. I don't think they despised me; but *I* did not feel cared for, just as they failed to recognise each other, they failed to recognise me, and I struggled to know how to deal with the situation.

It is difficult to unravel the first part of this morning's epistle. For us who live in a democracy however it does remind us of the need to engage in the democratic processes as fully as we can

and to contribute to the civic community of which we are a part. The passage however concludes with Paul reminding us of the need to recognise and take responsibility for one another and this is a heart of the democratic process, it is not all about what is good for me, but what is good for the nation. It is recognising those who have gone before us, those with whom we share our lives now and those who will come after us. In some way Matthew speaks of a process in the passage on discipline within the community of faith that we heard this morning a process of recognising and taking responsibility for each other.

It is true that often we use the last part of the reading to say: it's ok that only a few have turned up this morning! 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,' I am guilty of using it in that way. But whilst it is true that this does not do justice to the context of this passage, there is a danger in seeing these texts simply in a negative frame. They are after all about recognition of one other, particularly during difficult times, about reconciliation. We must read these texts, indeed we need to read all our scriptures, holistically. If we don't read in this way, we have failed to be Biblical. If we read texts in isolation we have simply highlighted difference, that which divides and failed to see them in the context of the overarching Biblical themes: freedom, life, love, unity. The normative is always positive. We are told that the influence of this Christian narrative is weakening in our culture. Among our primary goals is to ensure that such ideas continue to pervade our Church and civic lives.

I have spoken before about that little used part at the back of our Prayer Book: The Reconciliation of a Penitent. Even if you find the idea of personal reconciliation a difficult one, read through those words. They are overwhelmingly positive because they speak of God's love for us and in turn our love for one another, they speak of that which we hold in common.

In a former life as a military Chaplain when a small group of us would gather for prayer, whoever was leading would sometimes say 'where two or three are gathered...' and one of our number would pipe up: 'Oh good, who are we throwing out of the Church today.' It was mildly amusing the first time and it was true this is not strictly speaking the context of the passage. But isolation, division, ostracising folk is not the context of the Bible, neither is it the context of the Church we live in. A community which unstintingly worships the God who love us, and calls us above all to love one another. Amen.