

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Universal love in an age of increasing nationalism

Lent 2B

February 25th 2018

Romans 4.13-25

Mark 8.31-38

When I was working more with church children's groups and youth groups we used sometimes to sing the song *Father Abraham had many sons...* which goes on, *'and I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord.'* You may know it. Rather out of favour now, because of its language isn't inclusive....

Perhaps we've heard it too often, or perhaps it's too early in the morning, for us to be shocked by Paul's extraordinary statement about Abraham *'he is the father of all of us'*. (Romans 4.16)

Here was someone brought up as a strict Jew, proud to be a descendant of Abraham by lineage, as he believed, taught from his youth upwards that this gave him a special identity and status in God's sight, now profligately applying the idea of being a child of Abraham to a mixed bag of people, from many racial and religious backgrounds, spiritual riff-raff, they might have been called from the point of view of strict Judaism; people who had found themselves as Christians together in Rome, the centre of the pagan world.

Well, the rest of today's passage from Romans explains how Paul's thinking had led him to this shocking

conclusion – 'we are all children of Abraham' – but I just want to emphasise one thing: that faith in Christ was hadled Paul to break boundaries, to burst beyond his own national and nationalistic perspectives, to become much more inclusive and even universal in his thinking and sympathies. It was a breathtakingly radical change.

Paul talked about a fundamental unity between all those who had placed their faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. We tend to take the expansion of outlook even further, by thinking about people of all races, faiths and non-faiths having a fundamental unity simply by virtue of having been created by one God, made in his image; the whole human race. We are all neighbours. The universalising tendency of Christianity has spread out like ripples in a pond the Christ's followers we have pondered the Gospel and its implications over the centuries.

But of course, a universal outlook in faith comes up against all the basic instincts we human beings have to favour our own families, our own kith and kin, those who are like us, over others. Our deep instinct to band together in mutually hostile and competitive groups, no doubt inherited from our evolutionary past - this is at war with the universal love and concern which our faith teaches us.

At times the Christian outlook, as we may call it, seems to have had a massive influence on our culture; at other times it may seem to be in retreat before increasing nationalism and a turning inward of people in their views and sympathies. Perhaps we live in one of those times of retreat now.

This week, of course, we've lived through all the revelations about abuse in organisations delivering aid overseas, to the weakest and the poorest. There can be no question but that what has come out has been shocking, distasteful, and worthy of condemnation. But I don't think I'm alone in seeing the media frenzy as perhaps being born out of the desires of those who don't think we should give aid beyond our own nation – or at least, magnifying their voice, and giving them more influence. The great danger is that in protesting against mismanagement and the mishandling of cases of abuse, the great British public, in one of its periodical fits of 'morality', as Thomas Macaulay put it, may, because of these events, increasingly justify to itself the withholding of aid to those who truly need it - may if you like, bolster up the tendency to look inward, and not to have a universal sympathy which takes in neighbours far away and unlike us.

We shall have to see how far people in general slip into tarring all aid agencies with the same brush, or refusing to accept the reality of reforms and safeguards which Oxfam and Save the Children are putting into place. The potential tragedy is that it's the poorest people on earth who may pay for the misdemeanours of aid workers in the past.

OI wonder if those of us who go collecting for Christian Aid in May, may find it a bit more difficult than it was before? I hope not – and, as supporters of Christian Aid, we will be able to tell people that this is an agency which doesn't send armies of professional workers around the world – it works entirely through local churches and community organisations on the ground in places of need. .But, you know how it is, if someone is inclined to shut the

door on you, they're not likely to be inclined to wait and hear such an explanation.

Yes – supporting overseas aid charities may be more difficult this year,. And, every year I find myself unwilling to do this thing - to pound the streets and knock on doors for Christian Aid. But perhaps, as we ponder the shocking universality of God's love, the sense in which we are all brothers and sisters made in the image of our Creator, we should also ponder this message, which comes to us today from our Gospel: that we must not be ashamed to do unpopular things in the name of Christ if they are right. We have a calling to do something active to take up the cross and follow him, *whatever* the mood of the time may be.