Community and inclusiveness

Even before the American Presidential Election I wanted to talk today about community and inclusiveness. Now even more so, given President-Elect Trump’s rhetoric of isolationism and protectionism. And also because of his opposition to the globalisation that in my experience has brought such a broadening vision of human potential and cross cultural exchange. I know some argue that globalisation is responsible for the growing gap between rich and poor. And if that is economically true, then a political solution must be found, but not one that involves putting up the barricades.

Being a clergyman - a chaplain - I’m often asked to explain the Christian view of this or that. There isn’t always a uniquely *Christian* slant on social and moral questions, but there’s usually a broad background Christian moral vision to draw on. As you know, Christianity is one of the so-called religions of the Book. In other words one of its primary building blocks and sources of authority is the text of the Bible - and the New Testament in particular. In Matthew’s gospel chapters five to seven there’s a collection of Jesus’ ethical sayings called *The Sermon on the Mount* and this contains some really radical ethics, so radical that some have described it as ‘an impossible ideal’. Typical are the injunctions, to love your enemy, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile; plus the claim that anger is morally as reprehensible as murder and lust as adultery. There’s the saying that you cannot serve God and Mammon, which summarises Jesus’ radical teaching in other parts of the Gospels about money – it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God and anyone wishing to follow Jesus’ path should sell their possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Then there’s the fact that Jesus was exceptionally inclusive in his social outlook, literally embracing the ‘untouchable’ lepers, eating and drinking with tax collectors, drawing women into his inner circle, and citing foreigners (Samaritans in particular) as exemplars of compassion and gratitude.

More than this, my theology is shaped by the fact Christian teaching majors on community, relationship, mutuality and inter-dependence. St Paul is fond of the metaphor that Christians are the body of Christ, in which arms and legs and hands and ears must all work together in a coordinated way, and if one member malfunctions the whole body is disadvantaged. The Church itself developed the idea that there is a communion of Christian people – the communion of saints - a transcendent society embracing earth and heaven or, to put it another way, people of the past and present. There’s a parallel idea in this college (and all colleges, I think) that the college is the totality of its members, past and present, a membership that cannot be erased, a mutual society of people with a common educational experience in a very specific place. Furthermore, the Christian theology of society is much enhanced by our central act of worship ‘Holy Communion’ or ‘the mass’. Here we commemorate Christ’s last meal with his disciples in a representative drama, symbolising our relationship with the Divine and with each other. Antagonisms and disagreements are to be resolved before people come to the altar to share the bread and the wine. In the New Testament there are interesting narrative improvisations on this theme: changing water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, a fish breakfast shared with the disciples on the Galilean shore after Jesus’ resurrection, supper in lodgings in Emmaus when Jesus wasn’t recognised until he broke bread. In the very early church this meal was known as an *agape* or love meal - the word *agape* connoting the kind of self-giving, ego-subjugating love exemplified by Jesus in his suffering. And the idea that there is something revelatory and special about this, which is expressed in the Johannine letters: ‘those who live in love live in God and God lives in them.’

In practical terms I think Christian ethics presses us to ask how we can share responsibility for the needs of the oppressed and rejected in a world of increasing political violence. Of course Christians often disagree on ethical questions, particularly on sexual ethics, and there’s a long standing disjunction between the pacifism of Jesus and the Church’s famous theory of Just War. But these questions aren’t for Founder’s Day.

But there’s another paradox. On the one hand Christian ethics bigs up self-denial in favour of mutuality, but on the other asserts there’s something uniquely special about each individual who is made in the image of God. The doctrine of imago dei. Deny yourself versus affirm yourself.

Founder’s Days are often used as occasions for an institution to congratulate itself. To parade a proud history, celebrate the successes of its members and call to mind the triumphs (and bequests) of those who have gone before. It can therefore become unhealthily introspective. Rather like the egoist who, after a discourse about himself, says to his interlocutor, ‘Well that’s enough about me. What do you think about me?’ Is corporate boastfulness as unattractive as individual boastfulness? It’s surprising what you can get away with when you say it’s ‘for the good of the college’. Personal ethics is one thing but corporate ethics is another when ‘the greater good’ is invoked.

Anyway, the question of self rises to the surface. And being a student is one of the really formative periods in life when we try to answer Alice in Wonderland’s question: ‘Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!'

I sometime think the famous ‘Oxford system’ does for us *intellectually* what the SAS does for commando trainees *physically* - forces us into selfish survival with our emphasis on thinking for yourself and defending your case. And when you enter the Examination Schools after three or four years you know you’re on your own with no one to help you. Except the SAS also knows teamwork is often the difference between life and death. The parallel is college life: living and eating together regardless of background, builds friendships and corporate loyalties which are massively supportive and hard to break. It’s what makes Oxford and Cambridge different.

But not everyone feels at home here. I’ve known students from abroad who are proud to be here yet feel both an emotional and intellectual strangeness. Not simply culture shock – different food, different language, different social norms - but political discomfort perhaps at becoming part of a Western legacy evolved from violent encounter between their ancestors and ours.

For others the experience of Oxford’s intellectual and social elitism is in such contrast to what they and their families experience at home that being here is alien and threatening.

I came to work in Oxford as an outsider, with a reforming zeal at the University Church which threatened the establishment, and it took a very long time indeed to feel at home. And I know distinguished professors who say that after many years here they still feel intellectually vulnerable and frightened of making a fool of themselves. This surely rings true with at least part of our own experience and my basic sense of compassion makes me certain we’d all do well to think more attentively and sensitively about what might be going on behind the masks we all wear in this gilded cage.

There’s a young Oxford/UCL philosopher called Amia Srinivasan whose work I have come to admire and she points out how community versus individuality, or communion versus separation, is central to the drama of human consciousness. The tradition starts with Hegel, she says, but is elaborated most fully in psychoanalysis. ‘Each of us starts life lost in an other; or rather, at the beginning of life there is no other, and no self, just the undifferentiated union of parent and child. The self is born through a traumatic act of separation, by coming to see itself as distinct from someone else. And yet that separation is never truly complete. For the self depends on the other in order to be itself.’

She’s referring to Melanie Klein’s work on the child’s conflicting relationship with its mother as it experiences acceptance and rejection in the process of breast feeding. By the age of four years the child can begin to come to terms with this. But to be able to feel ambivalent about someone is, for Kleinians, an enormous psychological achievement and the first marker on the path to genuine maturity. Amia Srinivasan says, ‘This is a desperate, unbearable situation. It is why we all, at some level, have the urge to destroy those we love, to assimilate the beloved into ourselves, to annihilate him or her completely.’

So what do I do with this? Where do I take it from here? In one important sense addresses like this are open ended, small think pieces, where the only conclusions are those you might draw for yourself.

However, let’s say this is a shout out for community, whilst also recognising the immense psychological complexity of what it means to forget oneself and see the other. And how this extends to institutions: not to be triumphalist but also sensitively aware of all the undercurrents of experience represented here – inclusivity means to accept people of difference with greater sensitivity than we at first think necessary. Being inclusive is much more than uttering the words.

Theologically (i.e. in Christian thinking) what I am saying not only gives us an insight into the paradoxical nature of self, but provides a fresh model for exploring the big theological questions of sin and redemption, our seemingly innate violence versus the gospel of self-giving love, and the grand paradox of the nature of God: the creative one who stands apart and the one who suffers helplessly on the cross.