

Lent 2

Different ethnic groups, different faiths – different identities and cultures. How many here come from Newcastle? How many think of yourself as a Geordie? If you are from somewhere else – how do you introduce yourself to people when they say where are you from? I usually answer such a question – depending who I'm speaking to – as 'I'm from Newcastle – originally from Birmingham, but I've lived here much longer.' In other words, I'm not a Geordie – but I'm working on it!

How has your identity been shaped? Probably by your education, at various levels, by the jobs that you have done... Probably also by your faith, though we are not always conscious of this. Perhaps by poverty, or rationing when you were a child. Some of you have travelled abroad to work or study. Each of these experiences has an impact on who you are. The place and culture of your birth, the first language you speak, the way you dress and eat as you grow up – and your experience of faith – your exposure to experiences of God through beauty in creation, in worship, in words or music.. These are all foundational, reshaped and refined by later experiences.

Newcastle is not dissimilar to UK in its ethnic make-up, though we have fewer Black people and more Chinese. At the last census the city's population was White 85.6%; Asian: 7.3%; Black: 2.0%; Chinese: 2.0%; Other 3.1%. In recent years – even I believe last week, far right groups such as EDL have tried to suggest that 'foreigners' – wherever they are from – are not welcome here. Newcastle has on each occasion come out in force to challenge them and to say that Newcastle is as warm and welcoming as its reputation suggests. Whether we are speaking of a friend who is American, a colleague who is French, or a refugee from Syria, Newcastle on the whole wants to welcome them.

Faith is perhaps at least as important as ethnicity in people's minds. Again the facts are instructive. ¹ Basically – just under 2/3 report they are Christian, 1/4 have no religion and other faith groups make up the rest.

¹ Though a quarter (14.1 million) people in England and Wales said they had no religion, (25.1 per cent). the largest religion in the 2011 Census was still Christianity with 33.2 million people (59.3 per cent of the population). Muslims were the next largest religious group with 2.7 million people (4.8 per cent of the population). Of the other main religious groups: 817,000 people identified themselves as Hindu (1.5 per cent of population); 423,000 people identified as Sikh (0.8 per cent); 263,000 people as Jewish (0.5 per cent) and 248,000 people as Buddhist (0.4 per cent). 240,000 people (0.4 per cent) identified with religions which did not fall into any of the main religious categories. The most common groups were Pagan and Spiritualist, accounting for 57,000 people and 39,000

So can people of different faiths work together? And perhaps importantly, should they? After all, are these perhaps the people that today's collect describes as 'those who are in error'? And though we have enjoyed opportunities for dialogue with people of other faiths, we undoubtedly believe different things.

Jews are still on the whole waiting for a Messiah; Muslims see Jesus as a lesser – though valued – prophet, and doubt that he was crucified – let alone died. Though in these faiths – often known as the Abrahamic religions – we hold one God in common, our ways of understanding that can lead to difficulty – for instance the Holy Trinity is a doctrine which is hard for us to explain to Muslims or Jews – and our ways of worshipping are all very distinct... This is even more true for other faiths. Of course there are equally powerful divisions between different types of Christian – about the place of scripture and authority and patterns of ministry for example, but that is not our focus today..

What can we find in today's readings to help us?

In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed – God's words to Abram as he sends him out on a journey of faith... Abram was sent out from Ur, a place not far from Babylon, the place where he had been secure, in a place of culture and beauty, among family and friends, to travel to a place where he would have to compete with strangers for resources to feed his family and his flocks of sheep. Those strangers would be pagans. When I was last in the Holy Land, we travelled up to Tel Megiddo – an ancient city in the north of present day Israel, which in the Bronze Age was an important strategic Canaanite city state. The city is known in Greek as Armageddon. It overlooks the valley of Jezreel through which successive powerful invading armies have swept – and is on the route that Abram too would have taken. I saw the small simple clay figures which the people of Tel Megiddo worshipped, reminiscent of figures still used in tribal worship in India. Abram – Abraham as he became – brought news of his God, the God who – in Paul's words – gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Abram competed for territory – but his faith spread out to those he lived among. *In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

But God and God's activity are hard to comprehend... Jesus met, by night, with Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee, and is described as a leader of the Jews. Nicodemus feels that this

people respectively. Some of the other higher reporting groups included Mixed Religion with 24,000 people, Jain with 20,000 people and Ravidassia with 11,000 people. 7.2 per cent of people did not answer the question.

young man is from God.. But when Jesus suggests that no one can see (understand – or even know deeply) the Kingdom of God without being born from above – born of the Spirit – Nicodemus even with a relatively open mind is unable to grasp what he is being told – his traditional frame of reference prevents him from making sense – at this point - of what Jesus is saying to him. Later – after the crucifixion - Nicodemus becomes brave enough to come out of hiding and to join with Joseph of Arimathea in collecting and preparing Jesus body for burial... A step on the way..

So what about us? When we encounter strangers - aliens, do we see units to be organised and evicted or dominated? Audiences to be told what they should believe or people we might set an example? Do we see collaborators or enemies – and if the latter, can we love them?

God and God's activity are hard for any of us as humans to comprehend... We Christians see that 'God so loved the world' – loved and loves this complex fragile planet with its human stewards, made in Gods own image – that he gave his only Son to die a criminal's death, and to rise to new life, for us.. But we see through the frameworks and cultures which we understand – and we cannot know with certainty, only with faith, as we seek to draw closer to the Kingdom.

So: do we hold anything in common with strangers from other places, people from other faiths? Strangers are our neighbours – human beings like ourselves. When we see only pawns or enemies we forget to love. We are all human – God and God's activity are hard for any of us even to try to comprehend – in faith we stand alongside others who look through different lenses in our common attempt to glimpse the path. As Christians we believe that Jesus showed us the way – a way of listening to strangers – even sometimes being challenged by them to a new perspective; a way of generosity – boundary crossing – inclusion; the way of love.