

Sermon for Sunday 13th September 2009

A House of Prayer for all Nations – Robert Innes

In his book, 'the Art of being Belgian', the British author Richard Hill explores the communities of Belgium: their values, their weaknesses and their strengths. One of the features of Belgium that he considers is what he calls 'localism'. This is the way in which inhabitants of one small community can feel that the inhabitants of the next door community are 'others' – 'foreigners'. Of course this isn't unique to Belgium, but Richard Hill explores *localism* with some delightful examples. He describes a friend of his from the Flemish community of Zaventem – where the airport is. This man had gone to live with a wife from the next-door and wonderfully named community of Erps-Kwerps. Now though Erps-Kwerps and Zaventem are only 5km apart, this man explained that the culture of Erps-Kwerps was *so different* from the culture of Zaventem that he had to return as often as possible to his family home in Zaventem. Richard Hill says he tried for 30 years to find out what on earth was so different about the culture of Erps-Kwerps and the culture of Zaventem that this man felt very at home in one and not at all at home in the other. He finally gave up, he says, when a local resident told him that the problem was much more complicated than that. Mr. Hill had to appreciate, it is not only that the culture of Zaventem is completely different from the culture of Erps-Kwerps, but actually the culture of Erps is completely different from the culture of Kwerps.

Now many of us will recognise this in other parts of the world too. There are villages in the North East of England where I come from that feel exactly the same way about each other. All the same, if by any chance you live in Erps and can tell me why it so different from Kwerps, – well I would be really interested to know. Localism: it's the sense that I can only really feel at home amongst the people that live around me and share my customs, and that the others are strangers and foreigners.

Now in the history of the world, there has probably been no people that has had a stronger sense of being marked out and different from everyone else than God's own chosen people the Jews. The physical rite of circumcision, religious observance, obedience to the law of Moses, all mark out Jews from Gentiles. And experiences of terrible suffering and persecution over the centuries have only served to deepen that sense of difference. But at various times in Jewish history an awkward question has floated to the surface: if God has chosen the Jews does that mean he cares nothing for everyone else? And in the pages of the Old Testament we can see a struggle going on between those writers on the one hand who emphasise Jewish separateness and those on the other hand who hold out a hand of welcome to the foreigner.

That is precisely what we have in our Old Testament reading today. The Jews are returning from exile in Babylon. Solomon's temple has been destroyed and a new temple is being rebuilt. There are those, like Ezra and Nehemiah who are concerned that the Jews keep themselves separate from the other local people. But here, in Isaiah, another possibility is raised. verse 3: "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.' Here is a message of hope and of welcome. v6: "Foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord and to worship him...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer." As we saw last week, 'joy' is one

of the defining experiences of salvation. So foreigners are welcomed in to share in the experience of worship and of joy.

What is more they are allowed to give as well as to receive. We read that their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on the Lord's altar." It is through being allowed to *give*, to *offer things* – not just being on the receiving end of things – that a person finds self-respect and a place in the community. So the foreigner will not just be there as a guest, but as a respected member. And so the holy temple will be called a house of prayer for all the nations .

Now this was a big challenge and a big change of direction. Could the religion of Judaism taken on board the radical implications of Isaiah's prophetic message. Would it indeed welcome the foreigner into the Lord's house? Well sadly, in general, it didn't. Judaism remained more or less a religion for the Jews. It wasn't until much later, until Jesus and St. Paul, that Gentiles began to be welcomed into the company of those who worshipped the God of Abraham. But Isaiah's prophecy has continued to inspire Christians down the ages. And it remains a powerful inspiration to us here today. The Church is and ought to be a universal community open to people from all backgrounds and cultures.

Two years ago a group of skilled needlewomen from Harrogate in Northern England presented our church with a wonderful banner they had made for us. This banner normally hangs in the Charles le Jeune room, but today we have draped it over the communion table. It is an exquisite piece of work. The ladies gathered cloth from 13 different countries. They embroidered the words 'glory to God' using scripts from 50 different languages. And in English, Dutch and French, they inscribed the text from Isaiah: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." You could say this is a defining text for Holy Trinity. We aspire to be a place where people from all nations can find a welcome and a spiritual home.

If you've been a member of Holy Trinity for some time then you will know that living with diversity is one of our core values. That requires a lot of attention to communication, a lot of give and take, and sometimes a sense of humour. Since arriving at Holy Trinity I've managed to acquire a taste for eating fish-heads, but I don't think I'll ever like a traditional African goat soup. But we try to be a place where everyone can receive and can give.

It's often said that when the West Indians came to Britain in the 1950s the Church of England did its best to receive the strangers from overseas, but what really strained relationships was when the newcomers offered their music. "Please", they said, "can we offer our drums". And the English people replied – 'oh no!' Not drums! We never do drums! Not in church! That was a bad mistake, because the West Indians then left and set up their own churches and a great tradition of music was lost to the English church for a time. Here at Holy Trinity we are endeavouring to build a community amongst people with very different cultures and backgrounds. It is nearly impossible. It seems to require a miracle. And yet every now and then we see how wonderful it is when it works – perhaps at some special service with contributions from all sectors of our church - and God's rainbow people becomes a reality. United around the communion table we are able to say in truth: "yes, we are one body, because we all share in one bread and one cup".

It is only natural, only human to prefer to worship and to socialise with people who are like oneself. After all communicating across cultural differences is so tiring and we all long for people who will really understand us. And indeed, in Holy Trinity we have smaller groups where this happens: friendship groups, prayer triplets, homegroups. But God intends the whole body of the church to be a kaleidoscope of different colours and backgrounds. He wills his church to be universal. And in this international city of Brussels, God has placed Holy Trinity here to be a house of prayer for all who come to us, a house of prayer for all nations.

Our Christian religion, has no temple, no special place where God has promised to dwell in preference to other places. Nonetheless, our church buildings are vitally important to us. They form a beautiful space for worship, they provide the shelter where we can offer hospitality and build relationships. Holy Trinity is greatly blessed to have this big church, plus a hall, plus Sunday School rooms, plus the Church House building in the courtyard. Over the last 10 years these buildings have needed and have received a huge amount of investment. The whole of the hall and Sunday school areas have been renovated. A new entrance area has been built. The organ has been rebuilt. Our magnificent new East window has been installed. Over the summer we've completed a major project to improve waterproofing and fire access. And I'm very pleased to say that that work on replacing all of the church and hall roofs should start by the end of this month. Over the last 10 years the people of Holy Trinity have worked incredibly hard to make and keep this place, in a physical sense, a house of prayer for all nations. We can be justly proud of that.

There is though, one part of our premises that is still rather dilapidated. And that is the big Church house building in the courtyard. Many of us here will never have been inside it. But it functions as offices, as accommodation, as the place where people hold meetings or come to see the clergy. From Monday to Friday it is the nerve centre of Holy Trinity. The roof of this building is in a bad condition; the carpet on the floor is threadbare; and there are windows with labels on them which say: "Do not open this window unless you want the frame to fall out". All in all, the building is not in the kind of state that we can feel proud of. What's more, we are acutely aware that our church is almost invisible from the road. You have to come in through a pair of gates and walk through an archway that has paint peeling off it before you actually see the church. In a way this is rather charming, but it doesn't convey openness and welcome. The story is told of a gentleman who lived in rue Crespel for several months without ever realising that he was next door to a church. And, as someone said to me recently, do you deliberately keep the existence of your church a secret?

4 years ago, when I was appointed, the church council drew up a document describing our church, and it said: "The Church House building will need refurbishment within the next 5 years." And at our annual meeting in April one of our most church members urged us to do something about the approach to our church. Meanwhile our financial position has strengthened. And the lovely new apartment block that is appearing opposite the church is going to make our street a rather more attractive place to stroll along. So our Council is thinking that now might be the right time to address this part of our buildings in a systematic way. We have to carry out a lot of maintenance on Church House. Why not, at the same time, make this building a significant centre of mission and ministry – something worthy of a church that has cathedral status. Could

we have a room at ground level facing onto the street with lots of glass, coffee, a small bookshop, and a warm welcome? Could we make the archway a feature that is filled with light and colour and symbolism? Could we convey with our buildings – with those buildings that face the street and the outside world - that sense of welcome and hospitality that we feel in our hearts? For a start, we're planning to commission our architect, Richard Craddock, to do a feasibility study. And then in November, our patron, the Bishop of London, is planning to visit us and we'd like to talk it over with him and get his interest and support.

“My House shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” declared the Lord through Isaiah’s powerful and audacious prophecy. It’s a vision that finds its fulfilment in the picture of the church we are given in the book of Revelation. It’s a picture of people from every nation, tribe, people and language worshipping before the lamb. That vision is our future, and it’s a vision we try to anticipate in our church life today.

I began by talking about the localism of the Belgian community of Erps-Kwerps. It is good thing to feel proud of one’s home village, to delight in its customs and traditions. Local roots are important. But as members of the church, we are also part of an international world-wide community. And here at Holy Trinity that is more obvious than at most local churches. We are closer to the vision of Revelation than the average parish. It is our particular calling to build a sense of unity out of great diversity. You could contribute to that very practically today. Over coffee, after the service, why not find someone from a culture or background very different from your own. See if a relative stranger could start to become a friend.

At the end of his book *Anglicans in Brussels*, our beloved historian Roger Cox writes: “After some 200 years of English speaking worship in Brussels, we begin the third millennium expecting HTB to be a focus of greater diversity in its congregation, activities and outreach in this the capital of Europe.” Isaiah’s prophecy: “My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations” did not come true in his own day. But it is our challenge to make it come true today and here in this place. To God be the glory. Amen.