

**The Scandal of Particularity**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year A**  
**Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32, Matthew 15: 21-28**  
**14 August 2011**

At last week's meeting of the inner city Ministers Association the conversation turned to Martin Van Beynen's Press article suggesting that one big worship centre would be sufficient and efficient for housing all of central Christchurch's denominations and religions. Van Beynen is now well known for using his column as a bully pulpit for his militant atheist and secularist views. I have made a mental note that this is one journalist I will not necessarily co-operate with if he comes seeking information or an interview.

Although the article was tongue in cheek it feeds off a popular piece of lazy thinking called easy universalism. This is the assumption that one religion is as good as another, and that in the end they are all on about the same underlying reality. That of course is just not true. Pure Buddhism doesn't believe in God at all. It is a form of Gnosticism that teaches that if you have the right insider knowledge, and act on it, then you can escape the sufferings of this evil world. And Hinduism, with its pantheon of false Gods, is the most highly developed form of paganism that the world has ever known.

The other background assumption of easy universalism is that what religions are on about can be reduced to a set of brief, simple and universal principles, usually of an ethical nature. They all share these in common, they are pretty bland, rather like the kind of fatuous advice you get in a self help book, though they often have to be distilled

out of a lot of nonsense about strange activities such as worship, prayer and contemplation.

If that is the kind of mental furniture you are carrying around inside you, and if you have recently been converted to Christianity, then you could be in for a bit of a shock if, for instance, you start praying your way through the psalms. These temple hymns of 3,000 years ago carry one in to a strange world where the God of the Jews is worshipped by means of animal sacrifice, where he is asked to help his people defeat their enemies in battle, and in which God and man commune with one another on holy mountains amidst thunder and lightning. This is passionate literature. The people get angry with God, and he gets angry with them. They grieve over their failings, and he sorrows over their backslidings. There are major bust ups, followed by emotional reconciliations. It is all very Mediterranean, and light years away from the cool post Enlightenment rationalism of Mr Van Beynen tapping away on his word processor in Diamond harbour.

Why does all this Jewish religious cultural baggage matter? Why do we tell our converts that these details matter, that they need to immerse themselves in them? Why does the history of that obscure people from long ago loom so large for us?

There is a phrase that gets to the heart of the matter here - the scandal of particularity. When William Norman Ewer wrote, "How odd of God to choose the Jews," he didn't have kind intentions towards them, but the point is valid. God chose this particular people in that particular time and place to disclose himself, and his saving plan for the world, in a way he didn't do for any other people. And if that weren't

enough he brought about the life, death and resurrection of his Messiah in the midst of this Jewish context.

As Divine revelation makes its way in to the world it must clothe itself in a specific cultural context in order to become accessible and visible. As it does so it shapes and moulds that cultural context to make it a worthy and appropriate vehicle for what it sets out to do. This is what we see happening in the pages of the Hebrew Bible. God takes hold of the destiny of a group of runaway slaves of no particular worth or significance, and generates from within them a way of life that is akin to the Divine purposes in a manner that exceeds even the most culturally accomplished peoples of the world. Maybe ancient Greece and China was where it was at for brainy philosophers, good bathing habits, and beautiful works of art. But no matter – the God of earth and heaven is tabernacled with the Jews, and they are where the action is at in terms of what matters most.

This is what gives that religion, and what came out of it, namely Christianity, priority over all other religions. God gave his gifts and his calling, as Paul puts it this morning, to that particular people and no other. We can feel the force of that in the confrontation between the Canaanite woman and Jesus because for our sake we have to hope that she can overturn his mission definition of being, “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In that sense we can rejoice that the Christian Church became the one privileged exception to and extension of God’s prioritised people.

Which brings us back to those who want multi faith worship sites in Christchurch. The other major

world religions deserve our respect, they can produce exceptional individuals who put Christians to shame by ethical comparison, they may contain fragments of the truth, but they are not what God intends, and they do not teach the truth with a capital T. It is good for us to meet with them for respectful and truth seeking theological dialogue. It is not appropriate for us to worship with them in a way that implies that we believe what they believe.

The scandal of particularity has implications too for the way we think about ourselves as a Church. To be a Christian means becoming informed about the Church's past, and how we came to believe what we believe. To be an Anglican Christian means sharing in a set of sensibilities that mark us out from other churches. That in turn means caring about our history and religious culture, and thinking that it matters. For each one of us the sources of those Anglican sensibilities will be different, but hopefully we have some common referents in what we love. For me it is things like the poetry of George Herbert and John Donne, the wisdom of Michael Ramsey and William Temple, and the beauty of choral prayer book evensong or a sung Eucharist that make up these sensibilities. It means too feeling claimed by people from the past who I disagree with, the evangelical Charles Simeon, and the liberal F D Maurice would be a case in point. And it involves taking sides in history. When I look at the Presbyterian Church I see what the puritans tried to turn the Church of England into, and I am glad that they failed.

Perhaps one day the ecumenical movement, which I care about as much as being an Anglican, will succeed in reuniting the churches. Perhaps the price tag for bringing about this oh so desired

outcome would be letting go of some of these sensibilities. But if that is what will be required let it be a costly gift laid on the altar of sacrifice in full knowledge of the value of what is being given up. Sometimes these days I think that in the Anglican Church's desperate desire to survive at all costs it is rushing people in to leadership positions who neither know nor care about these Anglican sensibilities. The cost of doing that is the possibility that we may morph in to something else and something less than we have become through many costly struggles of the past. Indifference to who we were and what we are in our scandalous particularity would kill us just as effectively as widespread unbelief.