



18 June 2017  
The First Sunday after Trinity  
Choral Evensong  
Isaiah 56 vv. 3–8  
Acts 8 vv. 26–39

## Kingdom Values... Inclusivity

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*'The Kingdom come, thy will be done'. May I speak in the name and to the glory of the Living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

Last year saw the release of the film – *The Birth of a Nation* – it tells the story of Nat Turner, born into slavery, but, who against the odds becomes literate and subsequently a preacher. His eloquence is however used by his owner, who is heavily in debt; he seeks to use Nat's preaching to help suppress the enslaved of multiple southern plantations, for profit. However, as Nat witnesses countless atrocities by white slave owning southerners - against himself and those enslaved alongside him – he gathers trusted followers believing that God has selected him as his chosen instrument of freedom and orchestrates an uprising in the hopes of leading his people to freedom. The rebellion is put down and the film ends with mass executions including Nat's - the audience learning the shocking visceral and symbolic affirmation of slavery that Nat's body parts were subsequently used to grease wagon wheels. Yet, this horror is juxtaposed with hope, with the idea that the testimony to the brutality and injustice of slavery which creates the revolt leads in turn to the American Civil War and the birth of a different sort of nation: that at some level Nat's vision of justice sows the seeds for a more just world, for the creation of a single nation under God with a shared vision of the common good.

However, the need for the Civil Rights movement and indeed more recently the Black Lives Matters campaign speak of the more entangled and ambivalent aspects of belonging and nationhood; in that sense the nature of the nation, of any nation, and indeed of all forms of human community is never finally settled – rather they need to be continually fought for, continually rebirthed. And indeed the director of the film – stole – or appropriated – or perhaps, took ownership of the film's title from a notorious Ku Klux Klan propaganda film of 1915 which painted a very different picture of the nation.

Such Biographical dramas provide us with opportunities to reflect on the profound and disturbing legacies of race and class or patriarchy. They are challenging and we need to take ownership of such legacies. And, of course, those who need to reflect most on such histories of violence and brutality and cruel exclusion - in terms of a full recognition rather than a quick dismissal - are not in the case of *The Birth of the Nation* - Black Americans, Black Africans, Black Caribbean or Black British people but the white populations of the US and Europe. In a similar vein, the British, who still seem to bathe in the long afterglow of an Empire upon which the 'sun never set' – are less embracing of the implications of that well-known postscript - that 'the blood never dried'.

Which brings me to our two readings: And to the Birth, not of the Nation – or the idea of a Nation, but of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the focus, the centre, the beginning and the end of Jesus's teaching – and yet it remains elusive – it is *like* many things, - a mustard seed, a pearl, hidden treasure – a hidden thing, it seems, that can flourish exponentially. Yet it is most clearly seen again and again in the encounters which Jesus has with others – that reach beyond the inner circles of privilege and wealth and power – to the ethnic other, the despised sinner, the physically impaired, the unclean, the stigmatised, the mentally unstable. All those beyond the privileged inner circle, the sacred group, the exclusive understanding of the nation.

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The seeds of that kingdom lie with the prophet Isaiah and his radically disruptive vision of God's reign of peace and justice. Isaiah's utopian vision of the peaceable kingdom extends to impossible things - the young lion lying down with the lamb and the young child playing safely over the adder's lair. That sense of utopian impossibility carries over into his vision for human society, for as we know all too well, all too painfully – the glue that binds people together in social groups through collective symbols and rituals and dress and language – generates its own cruel exclusions and brutalities – the details change but for those in the excluded groups and categories they are just as real as the lion's teeth and the poisonous bite of the snake.

For the Jewish community known to Isaiah – the nation is very clearly an ethnic identity – again and again it is the foreigner that is excluded, a danger, a source of pollution – according to the Jewish law they do not belong, they are not 'in the assembly of the Lord'. But they are not the only ones excluded on religiously sanctioned grounds. Another group is equally notorious – those who cannot 'go forth and multiply' – and so, that gender variant person strange to the modern world, - the eunuch – already denied the joys of parenthood and the continuance of their name – is cut again - doubly excluded – cast out from the community. A community that as the Bible makes clear also, barely tolerates the barren woman. The reproduction of the faithful community – the people of God - blessed, separate, apart – demands then a price of certain people – their exclusion – but also their stigmatization. And of course – the eunuch was easily despised – incomplete, disabled in his manhood; not a 'real man', not a real person; and, so too the foreigner, impure, dehumanised; a 'dog'.

And yet here in Isaiah there is a fiercely radical alternative – a space of God's just reign where those so cruelly excluded are counted in; for God's house will be 'called a house of prayer for all peoples'.

And so in the book of Acts, we find the fulfilment of this prophetic vision in history – in this extraordinary story of the baptism and inclusion of the Ethiopian eunuch: The traditional rules about who is an acceptable part of the community are ripped apart. And the rank outsider becomes a pivotal figure in the story of Acts. For his conversion marks a key stage in the journey of Christianity from its Jewish roots to the birth of a community which seeks to be for all peoples: A radical inclusion that so perfectly captures and expresses the Jesus agenda of the Kingdom.

And yet of course, as we know, from our conversations and culture; from the tabloids, twitter, from historical reflections like *The Birth of Nation* or indeed, more contemporary British meditations on the powers of economic exclusion like - *I, Daniel Blake* – or indeed in the utterly appalling, horrific tragedy of this last week in which the voices and concerns of those who live in tower blocks and those who seek to speak for them have been disregarded to keep costs down; In all these and a multitude of examples where disdain and discrimination or outright brutality are commonplace - the Kingdom it is still just around the corner, belonging in that space 'between longing and attainment'; and for its birth we yearn and hope and pray - 'thy Kingdom come'.

But that yearning demands of us all a deeper reflection on the nature of difference; it comes at a cost – the cost of questioning our histories and identities and the way in which they contribute to our sense of who we are, our sense of confidence, well-being, self-esteem; a genuine searching of the soul; a reflection on all the ways in which individuals tend to make themselves feel better through comparison, by feeding off the marginal status of others to buoy up their sense of self. Such acts of comparison frequently rest on race or nation (think for a moment of the relationship the English have with the French or Irish) but extend to a

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sense of superiority based on other grounds, the ‘injurious wounds of class’; what has been dubbed ‘everyday sexism’; or the ‘slings and arrows’ of many other forms of stigma experienced by all those, who from the Ethiopian eunuch onwards, have been deemed unacceptable to walk in the inner sanctioned courts and circles – and have paid the price in diminished well-being and life chances.

The best of Liberal humanism, itself indebted to the inclusive vision of the Kingdom, offers us certain habits of reflection – and we can learn to see the world a little differently through - race awareness training, though active reflection on the needs of those with life-limiting conditions, or through the opportunity to bring to consciousness our ‘unconscious bias’. And yet the Christian is still called to something deeper, to a deeper conversion or formation of the heart.

That formation; that journey into a humility - rooted in the self-giving nature of Christ, that sheep to the slaughter, who humbled himself even to the painful and degrading death on the cross - is again touched upon in our secular language when people say that members of a dominant group need, especially, to ‘own their privilege’, to come to understand, among other things, that they do not merit the advantages they enjoy in life. Not fully grasping this, not seeing, not understanding this reality chimes powerfully with some of the most uncomfortable and challenging moments in the Gospel stories - we see it in the young rich man who cannot step away from the self-esteem that his wealth brings him; we see it in the sense of rejection expressed by Simon the Pharisee who has watched a prostitute wash Jesus’s feet with his hair and witnessed his powerful affirmation; we see it in the Pharisee in the temple who thanks God that he is not like that man, back there, the tax-collector and sinner, comparison with whom buoys up his sense of self but distances himself from God. The instinct to compare ourselves with others is unconscious and powerful, for difference is so easily turned into a ‘spectacle of deviance’ that ratifies and consolidates our own confidence or rather - insolence; it clads our vulnerability, fragility, precariousness, mortality. Yet if we are sincere when we pray ‘thy Kingdom come’ then we are all praying to be disrupted and challenged by those whose very difference from us, we fear, but without whom we cannot embrace the Kingdom. Amen



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For the disciples, the stated reason given for locking the door on the inside is of course a ‘fear of the Jews’. Well, that fear of the world and its very real dangers are palpable enough – and we know that this morning as we pray for those who have lost their lives in the latest terror attack in London. Such events alert us to the close relationship between the threat without and our fears within. We know we simply cannot allow terror and fear to dominate. We know that a world driven by fear and anxiety is a diminished and diminishing world. And so we stand, we stand together.

In the gospel we can see behind the locked doors - the feelings of loss and despair, of disappointment, of unfulfilled expectations, see that the real padlock is on their hearts, which is why they do not automatically recognize the God of Love, that is Jesus in their midst. So too, we all have a tendency to invest in barriers, to build defences; to protect ourselves against the ‘slings and arrows’ out there – against which there can be no guarantees. In our own reality - it is then the fears and fantasies and anxieties within that are the more troubling. Yet such a search for a feeling of security is a hopeless task – for the search for security and the feeling of insecurity are the same.

And it can lead us - if not to the sectarian violence of the terrorist then to the temptation of a turned-in religion of moralism – of private perfection, of rituals of moral achievement, to comparison, into a psychology where we and others are never quite pure enough, holy enough, moral enough – to be proper Christians, to be considered deserving of God.

Just as in the face of real, external threat, of terror, we are called to stand, called to courage together, alongside, in solidarity; so too in our daily lives – we are called to have the courage to be. The courage to abide in Love, in Christ, to stand in and through and with the Spirit of Love. We are called to be what one might call the ‘conspiracy of God’; that is to the ‘breathing together’ of the Spirit, to respond to the invitation to dance – and in turn to welcome all people into a community of participation and transformation; a community of sinners; of inadequates; of beggars and fools; of those who seek to be open to God exactly as they, we are, to be met by God in the middle of our sinning, in the nakedness, the transparency of our fears and anxieties, in the exposure of our wounds; ‘delightfully and appropriately unsettled’ by the spirit of Pentecost who gives birth to the Church and to hope in our hearts, hope rooted in that Peaceable Kingdom of Christ in which we seek a world that is redeemed, reconciled and repaired.