

## 05 Trinity 16

**Readings: Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35**

*“In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

By the time the Church of England has a special Sunday there's not much risk of disagreement. Education Sunday, we're all in favour of education. Homelessness Sunday, we're all against homelessness. Racial Justice Sunday, we're all against racism.

But racism is so emotionally and politically complex that we struggle to talk about it. Every school and every voluntary organisation receiving public funding has an anti-racist policy. But if you think racism is no longer an issue count the number of votes the British National Party got at the last election, or catch the undertones of the debate about immigrants and terrorism and the 'overcrowded' country we in which we now live.

When we have tried as a church to talk about racism we have uncovered extraordinary hurts. Some of our Chinese congregation describe an almost constant low level of abuse, with name calling and the sort of low level intimidation the Police can't do much about. At the same time many White people have become cautious of challenging Black people about anything because of the speed of the retort that's now a comic catch phrase, "Is it because I am Black you are saying that?"

John Sentamu, Britain's first Black Archbishop, has a new book coming out in which he says that the Church of England is "institutionally racist". Predictably the Daily Telegraph dismissed this as nonsense and quoted St Paul that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. They said that St Paul might have added that nor are there black or white archbishops, merely good and bad ones.

In this country the MacPherson inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence introduced us to the uncomfortable concept of institutional racism in the Police. Racism goes beyond individual attitudes and experience to our collective experience of fairness and justice. Institutional racism is often quite difficult to see but this week we've had a glaring example. In the land of individual freedom and opportunity it was poor Black people Hurricane Katrina left stranded in New Orleans. It's a potent image, and not just for the United States.

We have seen a number of times in the readings for recent Sundays that the early Church had to cope with disputes. As we live in a time when the Church is struggling to hold together at anything more than a congregational or factional level, this is a particular, if curious, encouragement. In today's passage from Romans the arguments were about keeping food laws and whether there are 'special days', like Sundays, or Christmas.

We've have so accepted one view of these disputes that we probably mis-read the New Testament argument. "Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables" is about whether or not we can eat meat sacrificed to idols, or ignore Jewish food laws, without compromising our faith. It doesn't contribute much, if anything, to the current debates about factory farming and the imperative some modern Christians feel to be vegetarians out of respect for creation.

So that they can live together peaceably, Paul exhorts the church in Rome to be gentle and accommodating, not quarrelsome, 'for the sake of the weaker members'. Don't judge each other but live and die for the Lord so that you will know that under the judgement of God we are all found wanting. To know your own weakness helps you to be tolerant of others.

The Gospel is similar.

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

(Mt 18.21)

Now here is teaching at the heart of Christianity. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". "Do as you would be done by". It's terrifically demanding as is shown by the example of the person released from debt who then enforced his own claim against someone who owed him money.

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

(Mt 18.35)

This is beginning to feel tricky. None of us would say that it was OK for Christians to have slaves. We're grateful that William Wilberforce didn't say, "well it's not a good idea and you certainly don't have to have a slave but for the sake of the weaker brothers and sisters who seem to need them be tolerant, forgiving and recognise your own different weaknesses". We look back on the suffragettes as heroines, people who spoke a truth that society and the Church are still trying to work out. In South Africa it became clear that the Dutch Reformed Church's acceptance of Apartheid was wrong and they deserved and needed to be challenged. These great evils don't get worked out unless people oppose them vigorously for the sake of the kingdom of God.

I do get a bit fed up with the number of Sundays we are supposed to keep for this or that issue. You feel it particularly on a day like today when the anniversary of 9/11 means we come to worship feeling the big pressures of the world out there. The justification for issues Sundays is that they help us think and talk about the hot and difficult things of our day, to test where we really are in relation to God's kingdom and set a direction. Know what we are aiming for and it's a lot easier to test our experience to see whether or not we are living up to our aim.

"In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus". (Gal 3.28). If that is our aim, for the sake of the Kingdom, we still have a long way to go. We can be loving and forgiving of ourselves and each other but we had better also keep that edge Christ gives us as we restlessly travel on seeking justice and that more excellent way of living which is the love of God.