

You are all one

1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a; Galatians 3:23-29

In London a few days ago I went off in search for lunch in the quaint streets behind Westminster Abbey. I passed a Church I did not know. St Matthew's Westminster stands at the heart of British government and administration, surrounded by departments of State and a stone's throw from the nation's constitutional heart represented by the Houses of Parliament on the one hand and Westminster Abbey on the other. But while these imposing icons of our national identity draw millions from around the world, St Matthew's stands unobtrusively on a street corner, proclaiming Christian values of welcome, hospitality, prayer and a sense of the presence of God, just when people are constantly passing on their daily round. It is the heart of a community - partly resident, and partly transient, some who pass as tourists and others who come to the city each day for their daily work - and in all the flux and noise of life which surrounds it, the church stands as a rock of tranquillity and stability. Its doors are open every day, and the regular round of worship and the regular tolling of its bell reminds the busy world that it is being remembered in prayer before God at least three times a day. The open doors are an invitation to anyone - regular worshipper, tourist, local worker, or curious passerby, or someone in need of friendship or comfort - to come in, enjoy the peace and quiet, find sanctuary and say a prayer.

I went in.

An Anglican priest and a deacon, and two others, an office worker and a homeless man off the street, were about to being a eucharist, a mass, a communion. I was invited to take a seat, and the simple spoken service began. Words familiar and unfamiliar around the liturgy; prayers for the community and the world in all its fractiousness; and bread and wine. I could have been anywhere

in the world, and the service in any language, and the church denomination any one of thousands, but from all that diversity, one unity.

"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus...heirs according to promise."

You are all one. No matter your ethnicity, gender, age, sexuality, social status, bank balance, or which school you might have gone to in Edinburgh, you are all one. That great, mighty, unsettling, often bypassed promise of Christian faith. We're meant to be one: joined, together, inclusive, complementary, hospitable, sharing, supportive, welcoming.

The most cursory of glances at any media source will tell you otherwise. Israel-Palestine and the horrors of Gaza, in what should be a Holy Land. Iranians fleeing an American supported war, whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation may be. The unspeakable brutality of Russia towards Ukraine. The sin of human trafficking on the English Channel, and in the champagne vineyards of France, and industries in our own country. The financial turmoil in many of our universities and colleges. Racist inspired violence across Northern Ireland as petrol bombs, bricks and fireworks were thrown at police. The abusive level of much political discourse in the United Kingdom from all parties seeking to make cheap scores and point fingers and off-load blame.

'You are all one.' Really, Paul? Have you seen the news? One New Testament scholar says that with this passage Paul manages to offend virtually everyone. Get real, Paul.

Paul, of course, is not writing for the twenty-first century church and world and does not directly answer all the questions we want to put to him. However, even in first century Galatia, which is located somewhere across central modern-day Turkey, the 150 verses of this letter touched on something universal about the human condition. In the Christian faith, if we accept the radical

inclusion that Jesus Himself offered to those who followed Him, we are all one. We have our distinctions, we have our unique identities, but in our faith in Jesus, we are one family, and there should be no division. Because of our faith in Jesus there is no, 'them and us', there is only, 'us'. Just because that isn't the reality of the way the world is, and the way that we are, does not mean to say that this is not the reality that we are challenged to aspire to and loved into attempting. Internationally and nationally; regionally and locally; amongst family, friends and colleagues, when God looks out upon the sea of humanity, though we do not see it, and sometimes do not *want* to see it, God sees His children. In war and peace; in want and plenty; in homes and on the street; in privilege and disadvantage. "...you are all one....in Christ." Distinctions do not vanish, identity isn't flattened out, but the barriers, tribalism, hostility, chauvinism, sectarianism, and the sense of superiority and inferiority is destroyed. "...you are all one....in Christ." These differences before God are irrelevant. If that is so for God and how God sees the world, what about us? How are we treating or not treating people and groups not only in the Church on Sunday but in all areas of life, in the secular arena as well as the sacred?

Then we look wearily, or angrily, or despairingly at our world, and maybe our country, and maybe our city, and maybe the Church and wonder what on earth are we supposed to do? Why bother? We don't matter. There's nothing we can do. A bit like the prophet Elijah in his cave. He'd been brave. He'd stood up to Queen Jezebel. He'd called out the false prophets. But they chased him out of town, and he fled to the mountains, to a cave in a wilderness. Alone, abandoned, full of doubt, his self-esteem shattered. Why did God use him at one moment and drop him the next? Why wasn't the trajectory of success and improvement only and always upward? Despite the fact an angel fed him, *twice*, Elijah felt separated from God and the rest of humanity. He was tempted to give up. When God came not in the earthquake, or wind, or fire but in a still small voice, God

asked, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" *Twice*. Elijah responds, *twice*, that he'd been brave and done all God wanted, and it looked to be successful, but only it wasn't, and bad things started up again and he had to flee for his life, "and I, even I only, am left." Isolated, cut off, separated, feeling inadequate, feeling nothing could be done.

As we look at our broken, fractious, crumbling world, is that our reality, and not the, "you are all one" pie-in-the-sky from Paul? According to mid-C20th existentialists, the cold hard fact of human existence today says that we find ourselves adrift in an indifferent, even hostile, universe, shouldered with the added burden of having to summon the strength to continue, nevertheless. When our Church finances are challenging. When our denomination, but in truth all faith communities, see falling numbers and aging populations, with too many buildings and too few people in them. When areas of the political world seem to be captured by narcissistic populists whose constant lies are told not so that we believe the lies but to ensure that we find it hard to believe in anything anymore. Why bother? Why not hide away in a cave and wait for it all to be over? What difference can we make?

Well, on our own, probably not very much if truth be told. But the Bible stories speak of a God not always working through spectacular miracles, but quietly and behind the scenes. An act of kindness where none was expected, let alone deserved. A generous donation or gesture, when no one anticipated anything. A word of inclusion in a poster on a London street from a fictional Peruvian bear with a penchant for marmalade sandwiches, telling the story that everyone is different, and that means anyone can fit in. An unexpected communion service in a tucked-away Church, where the table was open and anyone and everyone was welcome.

Where stepping out from the cave Elijah discovered it was no longer the case that, "...I, even I only, am left..." but perhaps rather the distant voice of another persecuted soul Paul the apostle

who could say, despite bitter divisions and exclusions and rivalries of his day that, "...you are all one...in Christ."

How we frame our response to Paul's observation, personally and corporately, as individuals, families, communities, workplaces, countries, churches, the whole world, how we frame our response will begin with our understanding of do we *want* to be one, and do we *want* to be 'in Christ.' If 'no', it's back into the cave. But if it's, 'yes', then step out, not alone, but together, with your sisters and brothers, and with God, and begin to put into practice the vision of the new thing God has done in Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen