Diocesan Synod

November 9th 2019

‘[Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.’

I rarely begin with a bible quotation, not least because this is a synodical address and not a sermon. Today, without intending to preach to you, the text seemed unavoidable as we mark the fall of the Berlin Wall, 30 years ago today. I heard it described on the radio this week as the single most tumultuous event of your lifetime and mine. It is certainly for me a moment like John Kennedy’s assassination, like 9/11 or the first moon landing where I remember where I was and how I heard. Such memory recognizes the symbolic power of such a moment, not only for that time and that place but in years to come and across the globe. But its symbolic power also reminds us that the actual coming together of human communities takes a lot longer, and remains complex and fraught with delicate negotiation. A wall comes down in Berlin and a new German nation begins with challenge to form. A wall goes up in Israel/Palestine, the land of the Holy One where I was on pilgrimage only three weeks ago with people from our diocese, and we see afresh the complexity of living side by side with other humans, in new ways and with different histories.

The words of the letter to the Ephesians, for all their joy, are written in full awareness of such complexity. The hostility between Jew and Gentile was more complex even than implied. In some places across the Mediterranean Jews and Gentiles had got on well, and controversial observances such as the Sabbath were well tolerated by the authorities. In other places there was strong hostility on both sides and for different reasons, be they religious or social. So now in these early years and decades following the death and resurrection of Jesus, as Jewish and Gentile believers form new, fledgling communities of faith, experiencing their own kinds of social pressure, the writer knows that the actual process of coming together is far from easy. If anything, living in a new community under one roof of faith will generate its own kinds of hostilities as social relations are worked out, and of course that’s part of the reason these words were needed at all. Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, but it will take time and energy of spirit to discover what that actually means in practice for them then, and for us.

But part of what energizes that subjective experience and journey into genuine community, a new humanity, is the realization of the objective truth, that Christ has made a new humanity possible. And even though we must reckon with challenges beyond solely our Christian communities, we can recognize the similar objective truth that we are all human, created, prone to trouble, in need of others. It’s not that everyone sees it that way, but that as Christians we can see everyone as a neighbour, a fellow creature, a potential friend. Our witness to the world to this comes then not only with stating what may be objectively true, but in being willing to take time, to engage in the often laborious but vital task of learning who our neighbour is and how we may love them.

I’m struck by that within the life of the Church by my recent visits both to Israel Palestine and before that to Rome for the canonization of John Henry Newman. As you will know Newman was Vicar of St Mary’s Oxford, the University Church, and famously resigned in 1843 to become a Roman Catholic, ultimately a Cardinal though he was never ordained a priest in the Roman Church. I served on the staff of St Mary’s over 30 years ago and preached frequently from Newman’s pulpit – though what a fatuous concept that is, that a pulpit might be his or hers, yours or mine. It fell to me to lead that parish and church in vacancy when my colleague and friend followed Newman by resigning as vicar to cross the Tiber. So representing Archbishop Justin and the CofE in Rome last month was poignant for me.

Newman’s legacy for the Church of England is simultaneously tricky, and in fact quite simple. The trickiness lies in what it signifies for ecumenical distinctions, yet beneath the appearance of boundaries we see in Newman qualities and ideas that undercut such divisions. As an Anglican he brought gifts to the RC church; as a RC he gave us much from which we learn. We can choose to look from the perspective of boundaries and say that he was one of us but became one of them, but we can also choose to take time, to listen, to hear in Newman that which speaks to us still. Such paying attention, rather than just accepting boundaries and separation, can be found among those living in the shadow of the so called security wall in Israel, in spite of its presence.

Our country faces a general election where Brexit will be a major focus and where we are divided in a way that I have never before experienced in our nation. We must ask of ourselves how closely we are prepared to pay attention to each other as we seem to become separated and opposed or hostile even though there is no physical wall between us. What we find as we ask that question is what is often important in places of conflict and violence. Sometimes it is right not to listen, to step back from constantly hearing those words of anger and dehumanization that degrade and oppress people. Attention may not always be good, as we feel in our own national and social conflicts. So if hearing one another is going to be possible, and constructive, in the political life of our country, it will need to find a way to hear beneath and beyond the presenting rhetoric, to consider what is going on at levels that are not always examined or expressed, and to speak with both honesty, humility and care. Such attention needs careful negotiation just as with the earliest Jewish and gentile Christians, because the things at stake matter. And with Brexit, the election, the future of the country, things matter, and matter to people. For the walls to come down between us then, it is not simply a matter of trying to be a little bit nicer to one another, but of finding and reaffirming ways to speak about deeply important things, to challenge, to hear, to learn, not to relinquish that which is deeply important to us and nor to throw it in the face of others. It is about taking time and care in the pursuit of mutual love and compassion. What grieves me most is the lack of care among us in word, in action and in our hearts.

We will find it hard to change, and our divisions will not easily be resolved. Our resolution to continue in such work comes from what the letter to the Ephesians states as fact; Christi *is* our peace, however fragile it might look at times. Christ *has* broken down the walls of hostility, however broken his Church may be. Christ *has* overcome sin and death, even in the face of the pain we experience. To proclaim such good news in word and deed is foolishness to the world indeed, but we may and must proclaim it in love, in faith, and in hope.