

Address for 26 September by Howard Friend

Numbers 11 v 4-6, 10-16, 24-29, Mark 9 v 38-41

Is he 'One of Us' ? - Mrs Thatcher was reputed to have said - about someone she wasn't convinced was of her political persuasion.

Them and us – we do it all the time don't we

Categorise – put people into little boxes – usually so we can denigrate them.

Brexiteer

Remoaner

Nancy Milford and her aristocratic siblings had a secret lexicon a language of superiority. U and Non U Chimney piece U – Mantelpiece - Non U. (All very confusing for plebs like us – but then - that was the point)

Them and us - this tribalism because that's what it is - is very prevalent today - and it causes immense problems.

The most recent painful divide in this country was and is around Brexit. We've more or less got over the Roundhead / Cavalier divide – I think. However back in the summer of 2016 Brexit divided our family - as it did many others - and things got pretty heated - until Helen – our peacemaker - sent around a 'Bishop's Letter' pleading for family unity. It was a good one and it worked. The things that unite us being more important than the things that divide.

There's no Them and Us

That's more or less the message of both our Scripture readings this morning. Or to put it another way. Them - is really us.

Both John the disciple and Joshua, second in command to Moses, failed to recognise God's Holy Spirit working in unexpected people and perhaps for them in unexpected ways. And both were rebuked for their blinkered thinking.

For thinking - but - They're not 'One of Us'

Jesus - let's remind ourselves - went out of his way to include those who were unusual, on the outside of so called society:

The Woman at the well – highly unusual for a Jewish man to speak or have anything to do with a Samaritan woman
Matthew, invited to be a disciple – a Tax Collector, one the avaricious, hated turncoat agents of the occupying Romans

But – then - after all – he wasn't 'One of Us. Was he?

He became - one of us – and that, as we will see, is a major part of the solution to this problem of Them and Us. He, God's son, became One of Us.

But I haven't quite finished describing the problem because it's a big problem – this 'Them and Us'

And what better way to cut through our pretensions than with humour and perhaps a smidgen of satire – and who best to practise this art than John Cleese and the Two Ronnie's?

You will remember perhaps that sketch on the English Class system with Cleese and the Ronnies lined up in height order Left to Right.

Cleese with his bowler says:

I'm Upper Class and I look down on them

Ronnie Barker continues:

I'm Middle Class and I look up to him but down on him.

And the tiny Ronnie Corbet concludes:

I'm Working Class – and I know my place!

What the new lady TUC General Secretary would have to say about that now I wouldn't like to guess.

Now - the particular Them and Us dysfunction I want to address this morning is the one within our own Anglican Communion. 'Faith rivalry' was what Moses and Jesus were addressing in their time and - rather worryingly - we certainly still need to address it today.

***** (NON) SPOILER ALERT *****

I've omitted the sketch for the newsletter on the basis that I want the element of surprise. So come, or watch tomorrow. If you can't - contact me and I'll send you the full script.

There's the problem – OK exaggerated a little for effect.

Each little huddle thinks it's got God on its side and is not prepared to see God's Holy Spirit working in different ways elsewhere.

But God really – there's no way they're one of us

What's the solution:

Well a little humility goes a long way – doesn't it?

I've also noticed that as I've got older God seems to have got bigger – funny that.

What I mean by that is - I've learned to appreciate different expressions of God's spirit – looking for the authentic, the life of integrity – rather than a carbon copy of my own experience.

I should say for those of you who are younger, there's no reason you shouldn't learn this important lesson at your age. I think I was a slow learner!

And as some of you know. I started from what is often called a 'Low Base' – that is to say my wonderful grandmother was quite quite convinced that the Pope was the Antichrist.

Let me just throw in a dose of realism here. With reference to other branches of the Christian faith. We will not agree on everything. But we should concentrate on those things about which we do agree.

Finally:

And Theologically,

But briefly – you may be relieved to hear

We are all made in God's own image as the Creation story in Genesis outlines.

That should lead us to have a natural respect for difference and an understanding of our equality as fellow human beings

And to pick up an all important point I mentioned earlier

Didn't God become 'One of Us'

- Because he loves us – yes
- To restore our relationship with God – yes.
- But also to help us realise there's no Them and Us because
- Them is Us.
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