

## A Sermon Preached on Racial Justice Sunday 2004

"People will come from East and West, North and South, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (Lk 13:29 NRSV)

It's a wonderful image for our contemporary world. We gather in the weekend during which the third anniversary of 9/11 has been marked. We gather at the end of the week which has seen the tragedy of Beslan School killings. And even as we pray Hurricane Henry is flattening parts of the Caribbean, there are floods in China and Japan experienced a strong earthquake. We are meeting at a time when millions of people, like those in Darfur are dying. These are all forms of terror today rooted in poverty, plurality and pollution.

It's an important week-end for me for other reasons. It is 40 years precisely this weekend since I arrived in UK with my family from Nairobi Kenya. What brought me here was a catalogue of Colonial racism and terrorism that I can now trace back 400 years to the Slave Trade.

You know the Triangle of oppression in which

- Business Men went from UK to Africa
- They took African women and men and children to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations as slaves
- They brought the wealth from the Slave Trade back to UK

This vile triangle was brought to an end. In the year 2007 we shall mark the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act being passed.

When the Slave Trade ended it was replaced with another movement of people from one Continent to others. People of India were taken to the Caribbean. The first boatload of Indian indentured "Coolies" arrived in British Guiana in 1838 and from then on thousands of Indians crossed the waters to new lands. Thousands of them went to Africa.

So there is a large Indian Community in the Caribbean. My family ended up in Africa as part of the flow of Indian Indentured labour there. Indians first laboured for the British Raja in India to build Railways. Then they took their labour and skills to Africa. My father and grandfather helped to build the Railway in East Africa. Their photos hang among others in a Museum of Asian Heritage in Nairobi.

Then the British granted independence to Kenya in 1963. My father was in Britain in January 1964. The rest of the family arrived 9 months later. My two earliest memories of the UK are these (I was 11 at the time):

- The people smelled of fish. It seemed that all they ate was fish and chips. I used to hate going past fish and chip shops because of the smell around them.
- My class mates thought I smelled too, of curry. But they went on to refuse to sit next to me in the class, and would wipe themselves down if they happened to rub against me. They would wipe a chair I had sat on before sitting on it.

That was 40 years ago.

Those were the days of signs like:

'NO BLACKS, NO IRISH, NO DOGS'

Those were the days of Enoch Powell and his vision of "rivers of blood" in the streets of Britain 20 years ahead.

In some ways we've made progress over the last 40 years, in other ways things have got worse. The world today is defined by 9/11 and of course many people around the world have experienced the 9/11 for many years, and every day.

- HIV / Aids threatens the lives of 13m people in Southern Africa alone.
- One thousand people die every hour as a result of hunger and malnutrition (Darfur in North Sudan is just one image of hunger today)
- 50m people uprooted - on the move as Refugees seeking a table of welcome

That's the world of today and the foreseeable future.

We are looking at a world polarised into North and South in terms of poverty.

The world is polarised into the so called civilised west, and the barbaric east!

It's a world that is being fractured along religious lines, particularly Christians - Muslims divides.

It's a world that has formed ways to exclude people along lines of race, colour, creed, caste, gender, sexual orientation, disability - from belonging and benefits.

If you read the whole of Luke 13 (in fact it is important to place our text in a context that begins at Luke 12:54) you will see that it begins with Jesus asking: "Why don't you judge yourselves what is right?"

He speaks of the suffering of people, and experience that is not just reserved for particular people. We all know suffering, Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right?

The chapter moves on to the story of one particular woman who is bent over with suffering who is healed. She can stand up straight. Her dignity is restored.

Jesus' critics who claim to know what is right ask the wrong question: Why are you healing on the Sabbath? Next came a couple of parables about the Kingdom of God:

- it is likened to a mustard seed that grows into a tree that houses all birds
- and yeast which leavens all the flour.

Then comes the question that leads to our text. The question is "Will only a few be saved?" (Luke 13 :23)

It's the \$6million question of our day, and much debated for many years.

Who belongs?

Who can be included?

What about eternal destiny?

Who will sit at God's Table?

Who does God include at the feast of the Kingdom of God?

The door is certainly narrow.

But that doesn't mean only a few can get in.

When I go to a football match, there are thousands clamouring to get in. The gate and the turnstiles are narrow. But everyone gets in, one at a time.

The gate is narrow.

All can get in, though some choose to exclude themselves.

But, says Jesus: "People will come from the East and West, North and South, and will eat in the Kingdom of God."

That's a fantastic vision Jesus had.

The central image here is of hospitality as opposed to hostility:

- of embrace as opposed to exclusion
- and of the fullness of life as opposed to denial of life.

There are numerous stories of Jesus eating with people, and particularly with those who are excluded from society.

Hospitality, in a variety of expressions, forms a notable frame of reference for the ministry of Jesus. He often arrives as a visitor to a meal, and becomes the host.

He sat down to eat with people, with multitudes who came from east and west, north and south. In John 6, before sharing food he asks his disciples to "make the people sit down".

The word translated as sit in our text is actually better translated as recline.

"People will come from east and west, north and south and will recline in the Kingdom of God"

Get right down.

The picture is of people reclining against each other, as they eat. There is intimacy and engagement. No one is being considered dirty or polluted - to be avoided.

Where we read in English that Jesus sat down to eat with harlots and tax collectors (Mt 9: 10) and with Pharisees (Lk 7:36) - picture him reclining with his company.

The word is ANAKLITHE which comes from the root verb KLINO which literally means 'to lean one thing upon another; to lean back, to lie on one's back, to recline'.

It is first used in the Gospels at Luke 2:7 where we read that "Mary (ANAKLINEN) laid him in a manger".

There is real sense in the word recline

- that people are beside each other
- that barriers are broken, no privileged places, no top tables, no positions of power, and people are relaxed in each others company.

Just imagine that Black & White, Christian & Muslim, Jew & Gentile, Gay & Straight, people from East & West, North & South, all reclining together, leaning against each other, eating together - in The Kingdom of God.

All at the same level, there is an equality of gender, race, sexuality, age and ability.

That's Jesus' vision.

That's the "outcome" we desire in all our work.

That's the goal of justice.

If there is Solidarity in human suffering, there is Solidarity in human salvation also.  
All are included, for all are invited.

God is the host.

God does the inviting, and invites even those outside in the 'highways and the by ways' (Mt 22:10) so that the Hall is filled with guests.

What is the challenge of this for us?

What needs to happen to bring people of different backgrounds, enemies even, to recline with each other and to eat?

Let's have a closer look at reclining.

It is the NT equivalent to 'Be still and know I am God'.

To 'Be still' meant to lay down all your weapons, to disarm yourself, and to stop warring.

To sit, to recline to eat:

- Is to empty your hands, to open your fists;
- To be disarmed, to dismount;
- To be relaxed;
- To stop being fearful of the next person;
- To stop worrying about where the next meal will come from;

How do we achieve such an outcome?

Our first challenge as followers of Jesus is to achieve such intimacy and eating together as equals before God at the Eucharistic Table.

The Eucharist insists that there be food at the Table, and that all shall eat equal amounts

- none shall have too much
- none shall have too little
- none shall have eat scraps thrown off the Table

The Eucharist challenges exclusion.

- none shall be excluded on the grounds of their ethnicity, colour, gender, sexuality, age, ability, creed.

The Eucharist is a foretaste of the heavenly feast of God

- it is a picture of people coming from the east & west, north & south eating together

'We, though we are many, are one body for we all share in the one bread.'

The Eucharist is more than eating together

- all who eat at this Table are awakened to work and pray for equality and end of hunger and the embrace of all.
- those who eat at this Table cannot eat broken bread without taking responsibility to do something about brokenness in people;
- brokenness in the body of Christ, the Church universal;
- brokenness in neighbourhoods
- brokenness in relationships.

If we eat broken bread and drink poured wine and do nothing about brokenness, and blood spilt today, we'll be like those who knocked and said 'we ate with you. Don't you know us?'

The Eucharist Table is a Table for All.

- We live in a world of conflict and divisions. The fact that this Table remains divided is a scandal and is an obstacle in the way of Christians, at least, coming together to eat One Bread and drink of the One Cup.

Christ welcomes all to recline and eat with him. We continue to fail him by failing to find ways to celebrate full communion across Christian Denominations.

We shall not succeed in ending conflict whether it is in church or society in general until we can get people to eat with each other.

Soldiers have to get out of their tanks and armoured vehicles and war planes and boats;

The Janjaweed militia in Darfur have to get down from their camels;

Suicide bombers have to put away their explosive belts.

The Biblical vision is to change weapons into tools, into plough shares, into pruning hooks, into medical instruments, into schools, into homes.....

Disarm

Forgive Debts

End Poverty

Provide a cure for HIV / Aids

Provide food for the hungry

We can all sit and eat together.

We can all do something at our local level by getting neighbours of different backgrounds, from east & west north & south, to meet with each other; to eat, pray and party with each other; to build, slowly and over many years, relationships of mutual trust and respect. To begin to cooperate together in action for justice and mercy; and to pray together for justice and mercy in our unjust and cruel world.

Hospitality is the framework of Jesus ministry.

Hospitality shows the heart of God.

Hospitality is to be the hallmark of our lifestyles.

Let us work and pray for a world that anticipates the feast of heaven where people will gather from east & west, north & south, and recline together, to eat together.

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