

Seventh Sunday of Easter

02.06.2019
By Ruth Harvey

Introduction

This text is a beacon that shines a light on Jesus' vision of unity. Here we look at a very familiar text through the lens of conflict and ask: what might it be like to be 'folded in' to the 'other' in an intimacy, and a one-ness as intense as that of the trinity?

Text

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Comment

How many times does he need to say it? In this text Jesus affirms his one-ness with God not once, not twice, but seven times, albeit with a slightly different emphasis each time. But seven times! I used only to read this text as the ultimate post-Easter call to unity: a call to be one 'as we are one.' And I understood the repetitions as Jesus' prophetic affirmation of the twentieth century management wisdom that we need to hear a wise word seven times in seven different ways before we grasp its power.

Reading this text now, through lens of conflict, I see another theme of 'deep empathy' appearing chimera-like through the mist.

Deep empathy is for me a sensation of being so utterly transported into the feelings and experiences of the other that we become one with them, even when those feelings and experiences are neither our own, nor necessarily savoury. In fact, they may be utterly abhorrent to us.

In my work with Place for Hope I find myself working alongside deeply divided congregations. The issues that divide may be theological (climate change, sexuality), practical (buildings closure, removal of pews), managerial (bad behaviour, conflicting views of team and leadership). Almost always, whatever the issue, the conflicts involve questions of communication. Who said what to whom when. Why someone did/did not respond to a text/email/call. The sub-text behind a meeting agenda. The power of body language to convey meaning. The post event 'car park' conversations. And almost always, underpinning questions of missed communication lie feelings of hurt, anger, fear, rage, despair. And sometimes hope, if we stay long enough and dig deep enough.

Whatever the issue, I regularly find myself in the company of good people sharing deeply conflicted views and emotions. The 'otherness' of some of these views can overwhelm me. Yet I find that sometimes I can so empathise with the views of the 'other' that I almost feel I have been 'folded in' to these very feelings – regardless of how unsavoury, or unsettling they may be.

One-ness, deep empathy, doesn't necessarily mean we must agree with the other. Indeed, encountering views opposed to our own may firmly sharpen our position or passion. Let me be clear. This kind of one-ness finds a limit when there is a blatant and harmful injustice that must be called out, or a legal line that has been crossed. There is however much grey area between differing views, and legal absolutes. It is in this grey area that most of us live most of the time, even in the church!

One-ness in a diverse world, however, does mean daring to understand the views of the 'other' such that we can sense the power of otherwise alien views or feelings in our very essence. Empathy of this nature may then lead each of us to 'consider it possible that you might be mistaken.' (Quaker Advices and Queries – one my children fondly remind me of!)

With divided congregations I increasingly find myself reflecting on a version of hope rooted in the Gospel which says: if we can display our 'otherness' in a robust, compassionate and empathic way, modelling how to live well with difference, how views can be changed, and how communities can grow, then surely conflict can be a potent mission tool. By displaying the deep empathy to which Jesus calls us in this text, 'the world may believe.'

Response

Consider experiences when someone has empathised with your views, and you know they have been contrary to their own. How did this feel? Consider times when you have offered this level of empathy to someone whose views you did not share. How did this feel? Practice the art of deep listening. Consider how this level of deep empathy may sharpen your own thinking on a topic or issue. Consider how this level of deep empathy may allow you to 'consider it possible that you might be mistaken.'

Prayer

Holy and One:
we pray for a world
where we are so folded in to the other
not that all views are meshed,
but that the depth of sharing
and the reach of love
may draw us to a deeper
justice and a fuller peace
for the sake of the world.

Amen.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Relationships