

Chichester Cathedral
Mattins, Second Sunday of Lent, 28 February 2010

I guess I must have a suspicious mind, because when I see a lectionary reading cutting out a section of a passage, it immediately makes me want to know what's in the missing verses. In what we did hear read aloud from Genesis chapter 17 we learnt of Abraham, as God makes a covenant with him, and declares him the father of a multitude of nations, 'I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.' Here we have the makings of a universal vision, with diverse countries sharing a common ancestry. And of harmony between faiths, as today we talk about the three *Abrahamic* faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

With this vision before us, who wants to hear inconvenient verses like 8-14? For these give Abraham's descendants exclusive claim to the land of Canaan, and tell of the importance of circumcision as a mark of who is in, and who is out.

So with the missing verses the apparent universalism of our reading is qualified with a more particular and exclusive message. And this tension between universalism and exclusivity is at the heart of the Abrahamic inheritance to this day. Paul wrestles with it in Romans 11, as he agonises how his people the Jews can have rejected their Messiah. He reminds his Gentile hearers that their faith is dependent on the covenant with Abraham's people Israel. It's only through the kindness of God they've been grafted into what is naturally a Jewish olive tree.

Paul warns Christians against arrogance. He's careful to affirm that the Jewish people have not finally lost their privileges as children of the promise to Abraham. They can still be grafted back into the tree, and so in this sense Paul retains a universal vision – of both Jew and Gentile included in God's covenant. And yet he's also prepared to make exclusive claims: his compatriots are rejected, at least for now, because of their rejection of Christ.

So how do you view members of the other Abrahamic faiths? Do you think of them as sharing a common ancestry with Christians, or as fundamentally different? And is there a standard Christian perspective on this?

In 1984, a report came out called *Towards a Theology for Interfaith Dialogue*. This set out the standard approach: there are basically three approaches to the existence of three Abrahamic faiths: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

If you are a Christian *exclusivist*, you will count all other religions other than Christianity as the result of blindness or sinful unbelief. Depending on how strong a line you take, Judaism and Islam are either wholly in error, or simply inadequate for salvation. On this understanding, Christ is the only way and therefore Christianity is the only genuine Abrahamic faith.

So much for 'Exclusivism'. Inclusivism, on the other hand, recognizes spiritual

depth in other religious traditions. This isn't to say that Christianity is on an equal footing with other religions, for Christ is the only way to salvation, and the standard or measure by which others must be judged.

Finally, pluralism. Pluralists argue that different religions present different images of God because of their different historical and cultural experiences of God. Thus Pluralism leaves open the question whether any one religion can claim the supremacy of religious truth. Pluralists aspire to openness, tolerance and equality.

You may or not recognize yourself in one of these views. If so, I offer a word of caution. Neat though this threefold description, apparently nicely describing the tension between exclusivism and universalism I identified earlier, all is not as it seems. Arguably every one of these three positions are forms of exclusivism, and we need another way altogether.

Pluralists, for example, may seem like honest brokers between disputing parties. What they conceal is their claim to know better than adherents what is really going in their faith. They want others to agree with their claim that different religions are all partial apprehensions of God, and mistaken when they say otherwise.

Inclusivists are similarly imperialistic, for while they claim to respect other faiths, they only value those aspects that agree with their own. There is no real engagement with the other faith on its own terms, for they've already decided where the truth really lies.

The bottom line in all this is that we have no way of grappling with the questions raised by today's readings which is not particular and exclusive. Only God has a universal perspective. We can't step out of our own shoes, but must speak from wherever we happen to be. We need a way of being both faithful to Christianity, and yet also genuinely responsive to our Jewish and Islamic brethren.

I realise by now that tackling such a topic in a Mattins length sermon is madness. But I've started so I must finish as best I can. For me the key is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God moving throughout the world. The Holy Spirit is present in every human heart, promoting every authentic prayer, every authentic seeking after God, every authentic action for justice and peace. And if this is so, it follows the Church must be open to those of other faiths or of no faith. Otherwise it will be missing the promptings of God. Through the actions of non-Christians the church can come to see some of its own blindness and sinfulness. There can be real challenge and learning here - *not* that Christians will only affirm in others what backs up their existing beliefs.

On the other hand, Christians have nothing to share with others apart from what they have been given by God in their own faith. So whilst Christians can be

deepened in their discipleship by the witness of others, they can still affirm their conviction that what is Christ-like outside the church, is called into greater completion and fulfilment within it.

This Lent, we could do much worse than open ourselves to voices we don't customarily listen to, and listen there for the voice of God. But if we do that, we should also ponder how we can better share the riches of the Christian faith with others. God is asking of us not one or the other, but both. AMEN