

Sermon – Freemasonry

Llandaff Cathedral

10th May 2014

At the beginning of most meetings I attend, members are asked to declare any conflicts of interest on the agenda to be considered. In preaching this sermon, I had better say that I have no interest to declare, since I am not a Freemason, have never been one and am not likely to be one either. Before you take offence, you need to understand something – on the whole, I am a non-joiner of organisations. I refused to join the Cubs or the Scouts so please don't take my not joining the Masons personally.

Actions or non actions, of course, have consequences. I will never have a statue in this Cathedral as one of my predecessors, Richard Lewis, has. I have often wondered why he was singled out whilst Alfred Ollivant, responsible for much church building in the diocese during the Industrial Revolution, as well as rebuilding the Cathedral, bishop for 30 years and a former Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, merely has a tomb here which can easily be overlooked and why Bishops Coplestone and Timothy Rees are confined to the Lady Chapel. One of you supplied the answer the other day – not only was Richard Lewis a Freemason, but as

they used to say in the Amman Valley where I was brought up, "*he was high up in freemasonry*". Freemasons paid for the life size gilt bronze statue to be placed in that prominent place in the Chancel.

But then, you can never tell what will happen. One of my predecessors, Archbishop Glyn Simon, was allegedly not much enamoured of freemasonry but now has a screen in his memory at the entrance to the Dyfrig Chapel and the refurbishment of that chapel was paid for by the Freemasons. The Bishop's Episcopal Chair in Bangor was also paid for by Freemasons. The snag was one of my predecessors hated the

Masonic symbols on it and had them removed. Had he been my predecessor in Llandaff, he would have had a harder job because there are monuments to Freemasons – Sir William Mathew and John Nicholl; a window to Anne Insole with Masonic symbols; the lectern was given by a Freemason and indeed there have been Masonic contributions to the fabric in 1949, 1956, 1984, 1987. So, without tearing the place apart, where would he have begun?

What all this shows is, I think, that Freemasons are not anti Christian – on the contrary, many devout Christians are Freemasons and have been on the PCC's of

most parishes I have served. Nor is freemasonry an organisation that merely looks after its own members' interests. The charitable giving of Freemasons is higher than any other organisation in this country, apart from the National Lottery and you have contributed to many artefacts in this cathedral as well as to the new organ.

I would not want to deduce from that, as the late Lady Thatcher did when referring to the Good Samaritan, that it was simply because he had the money that he was able to help the wounded man on the Jericho road. That may be true but it is to miss the very essence of what

this story is all about. The lawyer asks Jesus, "*Who is my neighbour?*" In my experience, lawyers only ask questions when they think they know the answers already. (I know, I've been married to one for 45 years).

To a Jew living at the time of Jesus, and especially a Jewish lawyer, the answer was pretty clear. It was all laid down in the law and the tradition of the elders and it was based on the basic premise of holiness because that was seen as God's defining characteristic. The Old Testament book of Leviticus puts it "*You shall be holy as the Lord your God is holy*". And holiness

meant separation from everything that was unclean and impure.

Jewish society was organised around the purity system where things were classified as pure or impure, clean or unclean. People who were maimed or chronically sick (and the robbed man could have been either) were seen as impure. Corpses were ritually impure. Women were ritually impure because of menstruation. Gentiles were, by definition, impure and unclean because they were not Jews and so any Samaritan was beyond the pale.

The purity system was a clearly demarcated system of those who belonged and those who did not belong and it was all done, of course, in the name of religion. On that premise it is no wonder that the priest and the Levite avoided the injured man – they would have made themselves ritually impure had they gone near him.

And yet there was another Jewish tradition – the prophetic tradition. The prophets of Israel constantly reminded the nation that there was only one God and that He cared for all people, regardless of creed, religion or colour, because He was their creator and they were made in His

image. Moreover, this God actively sided with those who were treated as less than human by their fellow human beings. He sided with outcasts, outsiders, strangers, widows and orphans, the unclean. As Micah put it *“What does the Lord require? He requires that we love mercy and act justly and walk humbly with God.”*

And when Judaism was in danger of losing sight of this fundamental truth preached by the prophets, because the country was occupied by a foreign power, Jesus took up the Old Testament theme of God being the Lord of the whole universe who had a special regard for outsiders, be they religious, racial or social.

So He associated with those whom some of His fellow Jews found impossible to accept – collaborators, foreigners, lepers, sinners, women, Samaritans – in short all whom the leaders of His faith classed as “them” rather than “us”. Jesus simply refused to discriminate. In fact, he reserved his harshest strictures for those who did.

Who is my neighbour? Had Jesus asked the lawyer that question in the abstract, he would have given Him a number of possible answers, obviously expecting Jesus to reflect his own discrimination. For the lawyer neighbours

were either literally those who lived in the same geographical area as him - people he knew; or they were people who belonged to the same Jewish faith as him; or they were those who belonged to the same social grouping as him. The lawyer was expecting one of those answers from Jesus and so Jesus' response took him by surprise. By telling him a story Jesus forces him to answer his own question.

The story of the Good Samaritan turns a religion of discrimination based on contrived purity on its head and replaces it with a religion of compassion reflecting the compassion of God. The priest and Levite ignored the man who had

been robbed because they wanted to maintain their purity.

Who is my neighbour? According to this story, it is any person who needs my help no matter who he or she is. This wounded person isn't even named – he is a man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho who is robbed and so deserves help even if the passerby knows nothing about him, his background, his class or religion. It is a Samaritan who offers the wounded man what he needs and wants. It is the Samaritan, whom a pious Jew would regard as a traitor to the true religion for worshipping

on Mount Gerizim, who shows what neighbourliness is all about.

The Samaritan was linked to the wounded man through the circumstances in which he found him, the event itself. The Samaritan found the man, saw the need, provided assistance, and thereby entered a relationship with him. For the Samaritan was not moved by charity, nor by a sense of "justice", nor even by a sense of "fairness and equality", none of which applied because he did not know the wounded man. He became linked with him simply because of the ties of their common humanity. In the words of

the parable – he took pity on him. There was a wounded man in need – that is all that was necessary.

Compassion, mercy, without discrimination are divine characteristics says Jesus. Consequently because human beings are made in God's image, and since we bear the stamp of His nature, we ought to reflect that compassion in our dealings with one another. We ought to treat all persons as our neighbours but frequently fail to do so. Because of that, legislation exists to prevent discrimination especially against the vulnerable.

What is true within nations is also true of the relationship that exists between nations. The fact that we can know about events across the world in a matter of seconds – often things we would rather not know about – expands our sense of justice and we realise we are all linked through social, political and economic relations with a shared concern, as well, about injustice and inhumanity – in Syria, Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan - wherever.

In this way we become neighbours to all who suffer from repressive governments, to those caught up in war, to refugees, to the starving, to those suffering from natural disaster

and to the homeless. Their concerns become our concerns because of their needs. That is why Freemasons in this country have contributed £50,000 to the Philippine disaster and have given money to causes that have nothing to do with Freemasonry - £2½ million in non Masonic grants in 2013.

For we belong, in the end, to one common humanity and one undivided human family. As the Welsh poet, Waldo Williams, put it:

*"God's mysterious net
Binds every living person;
Reconciliation and the whole web
Of me, you, Him*

Me, you together

Despite the world's divisions –

He makes whole his world"

Or to quote St. Anthony of Egypt "*our lives and deaths are with our brothers and sisters*"
whoever they are and wherever they live.

That in the end is the only answer one can
give to the question, who is my neighbour?