

## OTHERNESS

*A reflection for Mornington Methodist Church*

Sunday 27 January 2019

As I hope you have realised, this service has been constructed around the theme of **Otherness**. Let me invite you to share some thinking about that word, that thought. **Otherness**—which ought not to matter but always does.

Now in every great religion of the world, there's always a lot about **me**. My life, my soul, my body, my behaviour, my beliefs. '**Credo**, I believe' is how all the ancient creeds begin. The beautiful affirmation of faith we use here at Mornington is actually quite unusual. It starts, '**We** are not alone. **We** live in God's world.'

But in every great religion of the world, there's always a lot about **you: you, the other being who is not me**. The sacred texts of ancient Israel are full of the sinners, the wicked, the rich, the proud—all the others the writer is not. Sometimes that sense of otherness is extended to the whole world beyond myself. Or to a divine being, conceived of as infinitely different from and superior to me. (The German theologian Rudolph Bultman called God the Totally Other.) And, typically, religious systems are set up to instruct us on how to behave towards those others, that otherness.

This distinction between **me-ness** and **you-ness** extends to the whole of existence as we understand it. It's never been confined to religion and religious people. It's present in all scientific thinking, much of which consists of classifying things into this or that other. It's also present among philosophers and teenagers (busy doing 'their own thing') and communities of faith (separated from each other into denominations, sects, as well as major belief systems).

And it preoccupies human society right now—witness the daily news about Trump and his infamous wall to keep 'those others out, or the great split between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from its Russian counterpart. You can fill out the rest. I hardly need mention the ugly response of European countries trying to deal with a great wave of African migrants or Britain's anguished decision-making over Brexit (in or out of the European community of nations). What should these mainly Christian countries be making of the Leviticus reading we heard earlier?

My first observation is that the construction of **otherness** goes right back to the beginning of all things, making it a **fundamental characteristic of the universe and all life as we know it**. Think of the two great mythic explanations of how things came to be. The Big Bang scientific theory and the Jewish myth of the Creation. In each of them, we start with a unity and end up with an infinity of separateness and division—a process that is even now not yet complete. Think of 'In the beginning God', and then the emergence of a separate being, Adam (the earliest **me**), then that second separate being Eve (the earliest **thou**), and then their children, Cain and Able, who far from existing to support each other turn to killing the other... In the current scientific account of the beginning of the universe, first there is the unity of nothing. Then over billions of years the materials of the universe hurl outward away from the gigantic explosion that brings them into being, spinning, colliding, separating, forming new star fields, new

galaxies, new worlds, each distinct from each other. And on our tiny planet, somewhere in that mind-boggling continuum of time, a single cell divides (the first **me** and **thou**) and life on this planet has begun its amazing process of subdividing, eventually to form what Darwin called the tree of life with its limitless network of branches stretching out over millions of years and more millions of species.

But those ideas are almost too big for our comprehension. What happens if we think about just one human being, the one we probably admire more than anyone else? Jesus. The 'Man for Others'. For Christians, Jesus is the model and inspiration for our behaviour towards all **others**.

What are the marks of his behaviour? His unconditional openness: 'Come unto me all who are heavy laden'. His compassionate reaching across all the barriers raised by his own culture against foreigners, men and women, against those of different faiths, against those rejected on moral grounds by their society, against the sick in mind and body. His equal dealings with women in a male-dominated culture, his respect for children. His child-like, utter trust in his divine parent. Take a moment to recall some of the episodes in which that Jesus figures as a **miracle of love and respect for the other**.

Yet even Jesus (at least the Jesus we learn about through the gospels) was incapable of complete openness. Think of his words about the ruling classes of his time, the Pharisees and the scribes, guardians and administrators of religious practice and secular law. The 'nest of vipers' speech. Or his fury against the money-changers in the Temple. According to Luke he once declared, 'Whoever is not with me is against me, whoever does not gather with me, scatters.' And think of his attitude to his own family, when they turned up to see him when he was busy teaching his followers. No, there were times when even Jesus lost it when it came to **the other**.

And I have to admit that the Church, the historic body of Christ, has frequently given way to fear and suspicion, and sometimes deliberately inflamed hatred of the other. Here are three examples to think about: the Crusades directed against Islam (still echoed in modern antagonism towards Muslims and Muslim states), the persecution of non-Catholic Christians by the Inquisition in Spain, the troubles between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Could you add to that list?

Deeper still there is the conflicted human attitude over the worth of the mortal **body** as against the eternal **soul**, or the desperate fight to preserve the spiritual integrity of the pure **me**-individual from the carnal wickedness of the **you**-world. Consider the flight from the corrupt world by Christian monks and nuns, or the hermits of the desert, or if you want a modern instance the separated lives of the Gloriavale Community on the West Coast. Consider the killing of homosexuals by the Nazis, echoed right now in modern Chechnya. Consider the appalling ethnic 'cleansing' of Muslim Rohingya by Buddhist mobs and Buddhist soldiers. Consider the savagery of Shia set against Sunni. Sometimes our human dealings with each other—with **the other**—are almost too horrible to contemplate. And this is to make no mention of our frequently brutal human dealings with the other life forms that populate our planet—the fish, the animals, the birds, the plants.

Well the kinds of otherness that confront us all in daily life are numberless. As I said earlier, otherness, not sameness, is a fundamental characteristic of the make-up of whole universe. Otherness may exist in the form of another language, another cultural practice, another religious belief system, another racial identity, a different age group, a different sexual identity from my own, another set of social values, a different political allegiance, another kind of imagination, another set of workplace or social skills, another gender, a different degree of success or failure in life, another opinion on this or that, another source of pleasure and happiness, another face, another style of dress, another state of health, another attitude to the future, another life form.

As a pretty normal Christian congregation I guess we are all pretty well aware of the general Christian principles that *should* rule our own behaviour towards all forms of otherness. One of the basic ones must be Jesus' famous instruction to 'Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself.' But it is easier to name noble principles than it is to practice them, and at the moment (perhaps always in human history), our race is making some disastrous choices about others. President Trump's determination to raise a physical wall—come hell or highwater—to shut a few thousand miserable refugees from the wealthy life of his countrymen, is just one of many such bad choices.

I believe that one of the greatest challenges facing our own human society—and the great task of all contemporary religions—is to overcome its fear (and sometimes its plain hatred) of the other in all its forms, and to display instead our best human values: compassion, respect, inclusiveness, love directed towards all the others we encounter in our lives. And may I add, let us show the same compassion, respect and accepting love to our own silent partner, the hidden **other** within ourself. We've all got one.

AMEN