



Welcome One Another Just As Christ Has Welcomed You for the Glory of God

Charles D. Mayer, 2 Advent, 12/4/2016

One need only engage in a quick overview of the subcultures within the 1st Century Roman Church to know that multiculturalism is nothing new. Consider this: When

Paul wrote his epistle to the Roman Church, he was writing to a community that he did not found and which in fact he had never visited. The Roman Church was founded by missionaries from Jerusalem, who were Jews who still adhered to Jewish Law, alongside their faith in Christ; some members of the Roman Church were Jewish Christians like these. Some Roman Gentiles converted by the Jerusalem missionaries would themselves have embraced Jewish Law along with Christian faith. The Roman Church also included both Jewish and Gentile Christians who, like many of those Paul had personally evangelized, no longer followed Jewish Law. So just within the Roman Church we have at least four very different subcultures.

All this was against the backdrop of the Roman Empire, which is thought to have had a population of about 60 million; one in thirteen of them, or about 4.5 million, were Jews (Brown, p. 561). The city of Rome itself had 40-50,000 Jews. So Judaism – the tradition from which the Jesus movement emerged – was a very visible and important, but nonetheless small, minority of about 7 or 8 percent of the population of the Empire. And Judaism itself was divided into several subcultures; we encounter two, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, in our Gospel lesson, and we know of others, including the Essenes, who produced the Dead Sea scrolls (Brown pp. 76-77).

This really only begins to describe the diversity of the context within which Jesus and Paul ministered, and out of which the New Testament emerged. It was really strikingly like our contemporary context. It was truly multicultural; again, multiculturalism is nothing new. In fact, it is legitimate to say that fantasies of homogeneous societies, which the alt right and movements like them around the world have embraced, are just that: fantasies. Recorded human history is the story of diverse religions and cultures meeting, mixing, learning to live together or not, and changing as a result of their encounters. The New Testament provides one wonderful snapshot of this human process at a specific moment in history.

The other thing the New Testament does is to provide a theology of multiculturalism alongside that snapshot. Paul, for whom this church is named, who is the first great Christian theologian, takes the issue on fearlessly and passionately. As we have seen, writing to the Christian Church in Rome was very much like writing to the American Church today. American Christianity consists of dozens of subcultures, with a wide range of theologies, liturgical styles, histories, and traditions. Paul's

word to us is the same as it was to the Romans: there is plenty of room for these differences. “Welcome one another,” he says, “just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7). Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you. We follow Jesus, the One whose welcome was radically inclusive of all. Paul, himself a persecutor of Christians, was welcomed by Christ on the Damascus Road. He sought for the rest of his life to extend that welcome across all the boundaries that existed in his world. And he strongly challenged the Church whenever it became petty over inconsequential differences and forgot its mission of radical love in the name of Jesus.

There was a terrific op-ed article in Friday’s NY Times, written by Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne, called “The Evangelicalism of Old White Men is Dead.” “Perhaps we need a new reformation,” they write – “one that invites Christians to return to the teachings of Jesus and offers our neighbors a truer vision of how he lived and moved in the world” (In *The New York Times*, December 2, 2016). It’s hard to imagine a more appropriate message for us as Christians in Advent this year. Let us return to the teachings of Jesus as we await his coming again. Let us offer a vision of how he lived and moved in the world. Let us model a radical inclusivity and set aside petty differences. Let us show Jesus to the world until the day of which Isaiah writes comes to pass, “that day [when] the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10).

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.