

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover.  
Amen.

There is an age old rivalry in England that is more visceral than philosophical. It is not so much a conscious rivalry as an unconscious state of being. Even more powerful than gender or politics, this rivalry has the power to oppose otherwise completely reasonable people. It is a division that manifests itself in cultural and linguistic practices, and yet it is a division that none of the participants has any real control or choice over. From birth you are born into one part of the division. And even those who believe themselves to be enlightened overcomers of such ancient divisions, can find prejudices reactivated by hearing just one stray syllable. I am of course referring to the division between the North and the South. This morning I stand before you as an unrepentant Southerner. A Southerner with friends in the North to be sure, but a Southerner who like all Southerners was inculcated with a belief in the strangeness and oddness of the heathen Northerners.

I share this story because the North South divide of contemporary England is a division that goes back centuries. And when you hear our scriptural texts this morning us Southerners find support in the scriptures for just such a North South divide. Indeed, today's Gospel only makes sense within the context of a biblical North South divide. And in Isaiah we are reminded that the North deserves to be thought of differently, because it had strayed from God's covenant by allowing itself to be conquered and populated by heathens.

The shocking thing about Matthew's Gospel is that it sees Jesus venturing into the North of the country surrounding Galilee, into the land of Zebulun and Naphtali. As a good Southerner Jesus should have wanted nothing to do with those Northerners. Our

Isaiah reading is however premised on the idea that the benighted North will at some point see the light of God, a light that is expected from the South. And so when Jesus journeys North he is reminding the respectable Southerners of his day that God does actually still care about the heathen North of Galilee of the Gentiles. Whether or not it was particularly heathen and Gentile is of course open to debate. What was important though was that the religious authorities in Jerusalem believed that the Galilee area was beyond the pale. It was seen as impure and unrespectable. And yet it is from amongst the impure and unrespectable that Jesus draws his first followers.

One of the things I have never been able to understand about certain forms of Christianity is the obsession with respectability, purity and conformity. For when you actually look at the life of Christ, time and again, Jesus challenges the perceptions and boundaries of the respectable, the purists and the conformers. As his peregrination north shows, Jesus mapped out a spiritual geography in his life that is time after time transgressive. And in touching untouchables, in consorting with women, in challenging purity codes, and in including the excluded he transgresses the barriers that divide people from one another.

As we look at ourselves today, we have to ask what we are looking for in Christ. For so long as we are looking for order, boundaries and respectability we will find ourselves continually disappointed. While it may be that community life requires a certain order and a certain delineation of responsibilities, at the end of the day God is also found for each of us in disorder, dislocation and transgression.

The call to repentance that is at the heart of this morning's Gospel is a call to view one's life another way, and to cross the boundaries that we have been socialized into accepting. Another word for repentance, a rarely used word, would be the word

nativity. As human beings each of us are born into the world. While we often reflect on the knowledge that we will die, our mortality, we are not so good at acknowledging that our individual identity is also bound up in the promise of that condition of our birth, our nativity.

However young or old we are we are all children of nativity, and that nativity is the fundamental dimension of our human nature before God. Nativity reminds us that things do not have to be as they have always been. Each of us, however distant we are from the conditions of our birth, is called to continually remember that the newness of birth is part of our gift to the world. Every Sunday, and every time we say our corporate confession, God gives us the opportunity to lay claim to that nativity. In the liturgy of the church repentance leads to absolution, and absolution leads to a new found sense of that nativity, in emotional and spiritual rebirth.

Without the experience of repentance and absolution, we would not be free from the weight of our failures and lack of love. Instead we would be destined to allow the cycle of failure and lovelessness to dispirit and dehumanize us. Which is of course exactly what happens to many who are unable to connect to a community that is forgiving and unconditionally loving.

The challenge for us as contemporary Christians is whether or not we are able to revision this nativity as more than just a personally liberating spiritual practice. We also have to ask ourselves whether we can abide to hear the thoughts of the great philosopher Hannah Arendt. For Arendt nativity was not just a cozy concept about individual identity. Nativity was also for her a political construct. And writing near to the horrors of Auschwitz and twentieth century mechanized mass death, Arendt wondered whether nativity was humanity's only hope for political and social

change. Without an awareness of the fragility of hope, nothing will change. But through an honest affirmation of our birth as a shared condition of promise that knows no divisions, maybe just maybe humans might be able to live in peace and harmony.

What remains shocking to us today is that like Jesus we have to realize that nativity, unlike mortality, does not come easily. Its easy when there is a baby in the room to let your guard down and embrace the promise of newness and difference. But its not so easy when that baby is fully grown into a cantankerous adult to embrace the nativity of a fresh view of life in those who are different. But if we are to break the North South divide or the class divide or any number of other human divisions: if *we* are to transgress our social and cultural coding for the sake of the kingdom, then we have to allow ourselves to embrace those who are different.

Jesus embraced human differences because he knew that God is fundamentally present to every human being. And if we exclude certain people from God's kingdom because their identity transgresses a narrow view of social parameters then we disfigure God. As Episcopalians at the start of a new century, we have to be honest that however radical this might sound, there is nothing new in this theology. What is new is that the church is beginning to articulate the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth by affirming the true diversity of God's people. As a church we are both Northerners and Southerners, as well as people from the East and the West. Today we know that unlike Draco Malfoy's wishes for the wizarding community in the Harry Potter books the church has no interest in being a pure-blood institution. As part of the people of God, we are imperfect, to be sure. But we are loved regardless. And being loved, we are called to be transgressive lovers. In our nativity we received the promise of new life. But

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whenever we love those who are other, we make good on God's promises. Amen.