

May I speak in the name of God. Creator, Lover and Sustainer. Amen.

I want to look backwards and pay tribute this morning to the Norwegian archaeologist Thor Heyerdahl who died just a few years ago. Heyerdahl is best known for his Kon-Tiki expedition in 1947, in which he crossed the Pacific on a raft. This was one of a number of successes in which he built and sailed ships across oceans. Up to his death he was perhaps the nearest any professional archaeologist has come to the figure of Harrison Ford as the explorer of movie fame, Indiana Jones. But unlike the fictitious explorer, Heyerdahl was committed to more than just archaeology. He also drew attention to environmental issues and even burnt one of his famous boats in support of the efforts of peacemakers.

What really defined Heyerdahl's professional career was his attempt to reveal the contacts between some of the most ancient cultures. At its best, Heyerdahl showed how human existence has always been multi-cultural. And sixty years ago this saw him going up against scientists of his generation who tried to validate hateful models of genetic and racial purity. As we think about the words of Jesus this morning, we could do a lot worse than introduce Heyerdahl into the conversation.

Europeans have been ever so slow to understand Jesus in the context of his time. Ever since Christianity became almost exclusively identified with Europe in the medieval period, people tended to forget the origins of the man from Nazareth.

Jesus was Jewish. But Jesus was also living in Roman occupied territory. Through Roman occupation and trade came all sorts of other cultural influences, from Greek to Persian. All in all, the Mediterranean basin where Jesus grew up was a hotbed of cross-cultural influences. It would be wrong to think that Jesus somehow lived in a time when there was no ethnic interaction. Rather, the Gospels are full of different cultural traditions, from local regions like Samaria to exotic visitors from places as far away as Ethiopia. And so it goes on and on.

Whatever you think about the plausibility of legends such as the one that Joseph of Arimathea made it to Glastonbury with the Holy Grail, you have to know that at least in theory cold Britain would have been on the itinerary of some middle Eastern merchant trader. And by extension it would have been hard for Jesus not to have aware of the existence of different ethnic, cultural and religious traditions.

So, when we hear that 'In my Father's house are many dwelling places' what are we to make of it? To begin with, it would be impossible to imagine Jesus limits his message alone to those who are Jewish. Time and time again through stories like the good Samaritan we see that Jesus deliberately challenged ethnic and social boundaries. His is not a message for insiders, rather it is one addressed at outsiders everywhere. At the same time, Jesus is aware that his insight into God flows out of a traditional Jewish vision of the divine.

This tension between Jesus as Jewish and also as one who transcends his natural ethnicity is crucial to our faith. On the

one hand, Christians must bear a certain loyalty to Judaism, for we share common roots. But on the other hand, Christians are those who see that the universality of Jesus' message bursts through conventional ethnic and social boundaries.

What this means in concrete terms is that the person of Christ can never be identified with only one part of the human family. For Christianity to be truly Christ-like the Christian community must embrace all humanity. And so where we exclude people on the base of race or sexual orientation we disfigure God just as much as if we were to exclude people because of their gender. Now I doubt that is news to anybody here. But there is another side to what Jesus means when he says that in his Father's house are many rooms.

This other side has to do with the relationship between followers of Christ and followers of other religious figures. As followers of Christ, the love of Christ grounds our vision of God. But for people of other faiths, other people ground their vision of God. With Muslims and Jews we can see how much we have in common with their faith; after all, we share a common ancestry in Abraham and Sarah. In Hinduism, Buddhism and a host of other religious expressions the differences are stronger, but there are still commonalities.

It seems to me that as our global village gets smaller, we are returning to a time very similar to that of first century Palestine. Ahead of us we have two choices. We can choose the way of splendid isolationism, the way of mutual distrust and religious and cultural superiority. We can claim that we are the only one true culture or religion and we can have

nothing to do with those with different beliefs. The alternative route could be called the Thor Heyerdahl approach. An approach committed to discovering the crossovers and interactions between different cultures. And for Christians, it would mean committing to discovering the divine in other religions. It would be a way of dialogue and mutual respect, not aimed at uniformity, but seeking to cherish and understand what makes us diverse.

One sadness of the ongoing situation in Palestine and Israel is that the first way is so much easier than the second. It is easier to denounce and to hate than to listen and to love.

But for those who seek to follow Christ we do not really have a choice. We can denounce and hate those who are different, but we cannot do it in the name of Christ. All we can do in the name of Christ is love. And love is what I think this talk of many dwelling places all boils down to. The dwelling places have often taken to represent different parts of heaven after death. While that may be a legitimate reading, I think there is a stronger more powerful interpretation. For what I think Jesus is really getting at is the notion that everyone who loves participates in God through Christ.

Love, if you like, is the superglue that connects us to God via Christ. And when we love, no matter who we are, we are somehow connected to God in Christ. Pursued to its logical conclusion this would mean that everyone who loves is somehow, without necessarily knowing it, part of God. For if God really is love, then it must also be true that love is really God.

Easter 5 – 20 April 2008 – 8am – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

Here in New Hampshire we know that the path of love is not always the easy path. We know that we and many other Christians are still learning the full implications of love. But we are blessed to be led by a bishop who is not afraid of the consequences of standing up for the full inclusion of all human beings in the love of God. It took time for Heyardahl to receive the professional recognition he deserved. But that time came. And so I believe there will be a time when our Bishop is revered in every part of our Anglican Communion. For as Bishop Gene reminds us how we are connected to one another he shows us all the breadth of God's love. So I pray may it be for us too. May we love without reserve and without ceasing, that we may become like Christ, one with God. One with love. Amen.