

Easter 6 – 27 April 2008 – The Rev. Dr. Guy J.D. Collins

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

In a rare television interview the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida was asked a question about his mother. More precisely he was asked if he had a choice, what philosopher would he like to have been his mother. The questioner was Kirby Dick a documentary film maker, one of two collaborators that brought the movie Derrida to the silver screen. For someone notorious for not giving straight answers, this question elicited one of the clearest of answers. But be warned, it is not a straightforward response. For Derrida believes that it would be impossible for him to have any philosopher as a mother. And the reason that he gives is Derrida believes the tradition of philosophy has always been ineradicably masculine. And so for a philosopher to be his mother would mean finding a philosopher who has already done what Derrida has done, which is deconstruct the masculine system that is philosophy as we know it. In consequence, and here I am quoting directly, 'My mother as a philosopher would be my granddaughter...An inheritor.'

What Derrida is really saying, with not a little hubris, is that the whole of Western philosophy has been so male, and so masculine, that only those who deconstruct can release it masculine domination. Of course, feminists have been making similar points for a long time. But when feminist thinkers like Mary Daly or Carol Christ affirm the paternal nature of all philosophy it isn't news. By contrast, when a male philosopher like Derrida affirms

and critiques how philosophy has always been linked to a paternal figure we are in interesting territory.

It strikes me that without men like Derrida helping us see the truth of feminism there can be no hope of ever really challenging the legacy of patriarchy.

In a similar way, as we celebrate the beginning of Pride week in Dartmouth it strikes me that heterosexuals are needed to rally in support of those who are gay, lesbian, bi-, questioning and transgendered if we ever hope to challenge the culture of heterosexism.

Heterosexism is a powerful part of patriarchy, and the exclusion of those who have a different sexual orientation has been an ugly part of Western history as it continues to be in the present.

It may well be that Derrida's own experiences of Anti-Semitism as a child growing up in Algeria made him peculiarly sensitive to those who are excluded. But that was not my experience. Quite the reverse. And so the challenge for white heterosexual males like myself, who stand to benefit from every dimension of the current social system, is whether we can divest ourselves of the privilege that society has given us.

Happily we have theological help to do this, coming from one of the most unlikely places, St Paul. For believe it or not, despite his track record in other passages of scripture, today it is actually Paul who offers us a theological model for how we might hope to combat

patriarchy, heterosexism, racism, classism and all the ways in which we dehumanize others.

The key element here is Paul's encounter in Athens. As you know Athens was the seat of philosophy, and so when Paul addresses the Athenians this is a moment that someone like Derrida is paying close attention to. And what happens here is fascinating. Far from Paul denouncing the wisdom of the Athenians as somehow not truly Christian, Paul draws the Athenians attention to one of their own god's: the unknown God.

What happens next is nothing short of miraculous. For instead of insulting or denying the Athenians choice of deity, Paul engages in a quite Derridean maneuver. And as Derrida retranslated the question about a mother into a question about a granddaughter, so Paul retranslates the unknown God into a known God.

Now you may be wondering why this is quite so interesting and amazing as I am claiming. But think about it for a moment. Here we are talking about Paul, not someone given to extraordinarily generous words to those who have different beliefs. Which means that his view of the unknown God on the Areopagus is not some florid rhetorical device, but an affirmation of the way in which God's ways take time to be truly understood. But this only works for Paul and for the Athenians if they are both willing to understand that some of the truth lies in the other's perspective. Without the Athenians there is no unknown God to begin with. And without Paul there is no possibility of identifying what that God truly means.

If we believe that to be true, which I do, that means that the incident of the unknown God is actually a reminder that God's incarnate presence is found in all sorts of unexpected places. Once we combine this with the words of Jesus in John's gospel we can start to gather even greater theological momentum. Jesus's promise to his disciples that he will not leave them, or us, as orphans is a reminder that God's works will continue to unfold after his earthly ministry. Sadly the church has often been resistant to Jesus' promise that the Spirit will lead us into truth.

But for Pride week these are perfect texts. They remind us that in over two millennia we as Christians have still not really understood the enormity of what it means to abide in the love of God.

Clearly that is not good news. The church has rejected, abused and discriminated against all sorts of people for the wrong reasons, often in the name of some spurious readings of scripture. And we know that there continues to be rejection and discrimination, not least in the appallingly bad decision that was made not to invite bishop Gene to the Lambeth Conference. The fight for full inclusion of those of different sexual orientation is clearly not over. But at the same time, today we give thanks that now of all times we are finally moving positively in the direction of including the whole human family in the love of God.

At the last meeting of your vestry, the body that governs St Thomas, I announced that with the permission of our bishop I will bless the civil unions of same sex couples

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who come to me asking for God's blessing. I am delighted to say that in response the vestry unanimously voted to affirm and support that decision to offer God's blessing to same sex couples who seek it.

So things are changing. But other things remain the same.

God's abiding love remains for us - regardless of who we are, regardless of what we have done, regardless of our gender or sexual orientation. And the Spirit continues to do what the Spirit has always done, leading us into all truth.

In some ways we are like the Athenians with their many gods. Like them we live in a college town peculiarly aware of the new permutations and challenges of wisdom. We know that intellectual change is sometimes gradual. At others it is more like a Copernican revolution.

As people of faith we have to allow ourselves the time we need to discover the real God, a God who remains largely unknown to our society and to academia. And we have to help others find that God as well.

The cultural God who is a domineering heterosexual patriarch is a well known presence in contemporary life. But the challenge for us is to seek out a relatively unknown God: the God Jesus names as the source of all love.

May we abide in that God's love. And may God abide both in us, and all humanity. Amen.