

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 3 MAY 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

John 10: 11-18

"The Goodness of God dismantles the "Third Space" Between Us"

1. Last week we heard the story about how Rose and the kids in her neighbourhood reacted to the overgrown garden and the darkened house of their unseen and unknown neighbour, Mr Wintergarten. (Bob Graham, *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*)

To deal with their anxieties and fears, they created scary stories about him: that he is mean, has a dog like a wolf, a saltwater crocodile, and the worst thing, he eats kids!

Such an imaginative construction illustrates our human capacity to construct truth and knowledge about the stranger. It produces a "third space" that divides two different communities. As Jonathan Sacks writes in his new book, *The Home we Build Together*, we are "producing a society of conflicting ghettos and nonintersecting lives". The kids internalise and overcook the ingredients of this "third space", and it makes them anxious about any form of contact with this fearful stranger.

2. Today we accompanied Rose and the other kids along with her mum on their courageous journey to make contact with Mr Wintergarten, and hopefully to retrieve their football. Rose is still obsessed with her fantasy images of him as a child-eating stranger. Nothing external confirms this fear. Yet, first impressions are what they always are, as Mr Wintergarten is gruff and defensive in the presence of this unknown, little stranger.

What is significant, though, is that the encounter activates something new and different, "something he had not done in years... [he] opened his curtains." Colours and light spread through his dark room, and he gazes beyond his seclusion to connect with his neighbours as they walk out through his gate. And then he walks outside, talks to his dog, plays with a football and interacts with the neighbourhood kids. This symbolises in psychoanalytic terms the "working-through", which Eric Santner in *On the Psychotheology of Every day Life* describes as the

"process of traversing and dismantling defensive fantasies, the structured undeadness that keeps us from opening to the midst of life and the neighbour/stranger who dwells there with us." (23)

That is, to use my own image, through the meeting with the other, Mr Wintergarten is drawn out of his own inner third-space discourse into the world, as the stranger within himself enters into "attentiveness and curiosity about the world" (Santner, 17).

Without this meeting of strangers, of two communities, each as anxious and fearful of as the other, this miracle of shared relationship, play and a world full of colour and light would never have happened!

3. This simple children's story seeks to entice its readers into an ethic of participating and interacting in everyday life where strangers who initially are fearful of each other meet and form significant relationships. I have further interpreted it by applying Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as insights from Michel Foucault and postcolonial theorists.

To this I want to add, along with Eric Santner, that while Freud made negative assessments of religion, and that in a great measure he was correct where it disempowered people and cultures, psychoanalysis in its best practice and theory does have a spiritual dimension (Santner, 8). Santner writes of his authorial intent:

For in the view I am distilling from the work of Freud and Rosenzweig, God is above all the name for the pressure to be alive to the world, to open to the too much pressure generated in large measure by the uncanny presence of my neighbour. The peculiar paradox in all this is that in our everyday life we are for the most part *not* open to this presence, to our being in the “midst of life. (9)

4. Christian faith equally affirms that in Jesus we enter the journey to learn to trust God as goodness that brings all of us into mutual, trusting relationship, with the stranger within us and the Other as stranger. For this to happen, though, we require creative narratives or discourse to enable us to process the disabling third-space discourses that keep us separated from others who are different to us.

In our story in John 10: 11-18, John has creatively interpreted the teaching and life of Jesus, and the Old Testament teaching about shepherds, to deal with issues that are challenging the church of his time about different cultures. As Raymond Brown, *The Gospel of John*, suggests, referring to v 16, ‘I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold’, the church of John’s time “came only slowly to understand the import of these figurative sayings of Jesus pertaining to the Gentiles” (396). In Acts 10, we have the disturbing story of the Jerusalem church’s defensive and negative reaction to Peter’s association with the Roman community, suggesting he was polluting himself by this meeting. However, I suggest that this is more than just a rational lack of understanding. They are still embedded in an exclusive, religious discourse saturated with a Jewish culture, and unconsciously anxious and fearful of the stranger/Other. Again, to use the words of Santner, what is required is a “process of traversing and dismantling defensive fantasies... that keeps us from opening to the midst of life and the neighbour/stranger who dwells there with us.” (23)

In our text, John’s Jesus constructs a discourse about a shepherding power that seeks the goodness, care and safety of all people, especially those who are most vulnerable. We can see how John has reinterpreted Jesus teaching. He uses ancient images of shepherds from patriarchal, pastoral civilisations before Israel entered “the promised land” and adapts them to the agricultural and urban cultures of the late first century.

Scholars debate what the image of “the wolf” disturbing and scattering the sheep means. The historical Jesus probably meant the Pharisees disturbing his first disciples. For John’s time, this probably meant various Jewish and Christian leaders driven by divisive cultural and religious exclusivism.

John’s Jesus radically reinterprets the traditional Old Testament teaching on God as the Good Shepherd. This God sends Jesus who seeks the total well being of people, particularly those who are abused by people in power. The unconditional care given knows no bounds, giving his own life. This Jesus seeks and creates an intimate and mutual relationship with human beings. This intimacy and mutuality is transferred from the bond with God and Jesus, as parent and child, though being of an equal nature. In addition, this God and the risen Jesus work with the followers of Jesus, the church, to engage in mission, in the traversing of each third-space to share and participate in the goodness of and care of God and life.

Conclusion

What is the “wolf” in our culture? What is the third-space discourse that stands between and within us that keeps us from the goodness and care of God; from the goodness and care of the stranger within us, and of the stranger who is our neighbour?

In the film *Frost/Nixon*, the playboy David Frost interviews former President Richard Nixon in four 90-minute TV interviews. A film brilliantly portraying the third-space of each character, and the seeming unbridgeable divide between them. The playboy is embedded in shallow enthusiasm, needing people to like him, and avoids hard intellectual work. A President entombed in obsessive thought, power seeking and love of dogs more than people. In the film they grow to realise they are “both motivated by a sense of being patronised, lower-middle-class outsiders.” (Philip French, *The Observer*, Sunday 25 January 2009) In the final interview, there is a moving shift. The playboy sheds his superficiality and finally does the appropriate research and interviews with strength. The President, like our Mr Wintergarten character, lets down his defences, and confesses that he just does not have the strength “to carry on denying it all”.

Significant encounters can transform persons and cultures as we have the courage to work on identifying their constructed “third-space” discourse which separate us, as we recognise the unconscious desires and anxieties that have shaped this defensive discourse, and then be open to listen to the other with respect and openness. The goodness and care of God, realised in faith and emergent in the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, motivates such transformative engagement in everyday life.