LIMBOROUGH LECTURE

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Beyond Binary: A Christian Response To Difference

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Thank you for the invitation to give this year's lecture. I was delighted to receive in preparation your glossy brochure, and to discover inside an article about my great-great-great grandfather, Samuel Wilson, Lord Mayor of London 1838-9, apprentice to Upper Bailiff Richard Lea, whose surname Samuel was required to continue upon marrying Richard's daughter, and which we still use in my family as a middle name – my father was named Richard Lea Ison – so I do have a remote connection with your company. But to business.

On 14th December 2017 at St Paul's Cathedral there was a memorial service for survivors and bereaved families six months after the Grenfell Tower fire. It was alleged in some media outlets that the Cathedral authorities had banned Conservative borough councillors from Kensington and Chelsea from attending. Most media however reported the story correctly: that because of the strength of feeling among survivors and bereaved towards the Council, after discussion with the local bishop the governing councillors for the borough had decided of their own volition not to attend the service, but to express their support for survivors and bereaved in other ways. The truth is a positive story about sensitivity to others: but it's much more appealing to news media to have a story of conflict, whether it's true or not.

That preference for binary conflict, for setting us over against them, runs through so much of human interaction and experience. Brexiteer or Remainer? Conservative or Labour? Fundamentalist or liberal, Christian or Muslim, religious or secular, my tribe or yours, friend or enemy? Student unions are increasingly barring speakers they think they don't want to hear: is this about free speech, or about hate speech, or about the inability to cope with difference and challenge?

We have the intractable human problem of how we live together with difference. Even if we say we're liberal and believe in free speech, do we nonetheless exclude those who have views which exclude us? Or to take a more Christian view: how do we love our enemies?

This can only be the outline of a response, and I'm taking a Christian approach in line with the will of James Limborough 'to promote useful religious knowledge'. I'm going to reflect on seven human issues around difference, and offer seven further reflections on Christian ways to handle difference as constructively as possible.

Please note that any lecture can only be partial. But I hope to challenge all of us here, including me: how can we avoid being binary in our approach to others? And that's not just a question about the limits of our own love and generosity: it's also a question about justice for others, and how we defend those who are vulnerable from being abused by others – and perhaps even by ourselves.

1. What are the wider human issues around difference?

We start with the history of humanity – tribes competing to survive in a hostile world against predators and other human groups. Our animal and humanoid ancestors learned that co-operation is a good survival strategy, up to a point: the herd, the flock, a pride of lions, all competing with other groups for resources – too many of one kind leads to over-use of resources and a collapse in population (which may be what's facing our human world in due course).

It's in this context that we've learned to form our identity: we relate to a group which is a manageable number but avoids being overwhelmed: so our **community sizes** are something like this, on seven levels:
- the smallest community of close family/kin/close friends, a group size of not more than a few tens of people
- then the equivalent of a village of around 100 neighbours, a number of people we can know reasonably well, with strong shared interests
- beyond that is a town of hundreds more acquaintances like us, people we can recognise and many of whose names we know
- still bigger is a city, which contains different groups including different identities or tribes of people, perhaps with different language groups
- then a country, which has stronger regional identities and a weaker common identity
- then our world of different countries, between which identities are more distinct and connections between groups of people harder to maintain
- and finally our universe of one shared equal and common humanity: which we may or may not believe in theory (so racists will deny our equal humanity); and may or may not practice in how we treat others (to use the quote generally attributed to Linus in the cartoon strip Peanuts, 'I love humanity, it's people I can't stand').

So here are **seven particular features** of why this tribal history makes handling difference difficult for human beings:

1.1. We are naturally **Tribal** and binary: Them and Us is built into our DNA. We define ourselves over against others, as different but not equal (so the question to Jesus regarding the Good Samaritan, 'who is my neighbour?'); we naturally regard ourselves as explicitly or implicitly better. Tribes define themselves by having boundaries, by excluding others: so exclusion is a normal part of our inherited humanity, and our identity is formed through exclusion, not by relating to all humanity: an inclusive identity is unnatural, and therefore difficult.

1.2. **Community versus individual**: when the survival of the community is threatened, the will and rights of the individual matter little. Hence the use of external war and conflict as a tool for compliance and internal unity by threatened rulers: e.g. emphasising the threat from Napoleonic France was part of the late eighteenth century ruling classes' strategy for staving off revolution in England, along with putting heroic statues in St Paul's for the lower orders to emulate. And fear of the French has had a long history in England: my father refused to retire to the Isle of Wight on the grounds that it was too close to the French. Our default position tends to be the view of those around us: we're hard-wired to emphasise the mass over the individual, unless we're the individual in question, of course.

1.3. Community thinking is nearly always **conservative** – 'it's worked in the past', 'change is difficult'. But response to changes in the environment has to happen if a community isn't to become extinct – leading to the phenomenon of changing while insisting that we're really not changing – an approach which churches have been especially good at, for example changing attitudes about war and pacifism or contraception. A way of coping with change when we don't

think we should be changing is to see such changes as the appropriate application of consistent principles in changing circumstances, as climate and culture and science and populations change: as the Church of England puts it rather elegantly, we proclaim the unchanging gospel afresh in each generation; or as both Brexiteers and Remainers have it, we are acting consistently with being truly British, even if that is interpreted in contradictory terms.

1.4. Uncontrolled **individuality** is seen as a threat by tribes and communities, and potentially as a betrayal of the group. On the other hand, creative individuality and non-compliance by, for example, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Galileo, Luther or Lenin has brought alternative solutions and possibilities which can enhance the survival of the community or tribe. At some point a tribe has to choose between keeping the unchanging tradition and so dwindling or dying out (think of the Shakers, or indigenous tribal peoples), or adapting to the future but in the process losing some of what has made them distinctively themselves by changing their identity (think of the Jewish people expelled from Jerusalem). And because individual people change at different speeds and have different attitudes to change, there is always instability in tribes and communities, which if not expressed in open conflict is nonetheless lurking below the surface as a constant source of anxiety.

1.5. The community needs a **common ideology** and a **shared story** around which to coalesce. Commitment to a shared goal or god, to divine kingship or democracy, to liberty, fraternity and equality or to British values of pragmatism and tolerance, to an army or a sports team, gives us a sense of common identity. The question at stake for how we handle difference is how tightly those community ideologies and stories are defined: for example, more of the United Kingdom could come together around the Olympics in 2012 despite them being in London (which is regarded as out of touch and 'other' by many in different parts of the country) because there was a truly national team in the Olympics, and also it did well, which helped (people like to be on the winning side); whereas coming together around rugby or cricket appeals to a more limited section of the population. The more that beliefs and a common story are shared, the stronger the sense of community.

But how do groups respond to non-compliance with their common ideology and story? The British have prided themselves on their tolerance and acceptance of eccentricity: but there are limits – you can play the fool, but you mustn't threaten social class; you can busk next to a queue, but woe betide you if you try to jump it; you can be a republican, but you must love the Queen; you can come from a different ethnic group, but don't get above your station. Where are the community's non-negotiable values and attitudes, and what happens to those who question or go beyond them?

1.6. There's an **emotional tension** in human beings between the *drive to belong*, to be part of a group, and the *drive to discover your individual identity;* an often overwhelming tension in adolescence which forms the plot of countless novels and films. The child rebels against their parents, the dissident or prophet stands up against social norms. You will have your own memories of the conflicts which you went through in order to negotiate fitting into the group and finding your own identity. Many of them may be painful: but that's a normal human experience.

1.7. The handling of difference within and between communities is generally regarded as a **zero-sum power game**. If I get my way, you won't get yours: my gain is your loss, and vice-versa. The concept of justice and its handmaid equality (before the law) is a way to address this. But the question there is: where does your justice come from?

Each year the deans of the Church of England have a very hard-working and gruelling conference after Easter. In 2013 it was in Westminster, and we visited the Supreme Court and asked the law

lords that question: where do your values in making judgements come from, and how do you know what is right and reasonable when judging social questions such as abortion or gay rights? And the answer was that they listen to what people are saying, and take that as their guide to what people in our society think is reasonable justice. That's realistic – we know how people's views have changed, so for example sentencing people to be transported because they stole a loaf of bread to feed themselves is no longer thought to be reasonable: but the danger is that justice becomes a matter of power not principle, with the supposed majority or the articulate minority imposing their will on others.

We know this too in our personal relationships and in our own communities. One person's beliefs or choices can conflict with those of another: how free are we to live out our own lifestyle or identity? The boundaries between what the individual sees as good for themselves, what a group sees as good for its members, and what is society's common good, are continually contested, and always will be. Sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, paying taxes, religious observance, political creeds, Brexit and many more – how do we survive as a country and as a world in the midst of so many competing interests and cultures?

Responses to these power problems of difference have in history included at least the following four strategies:
(a) open conflict, persecution or genocide to eradicate difference, assimilate it, or deny it and drive it underground;
(b) separate development based on a relatively narrow definition of nationalism, culture or creed: leading to nation states, apartheid, or limited self-government, from Roman satraps to Ottoman millets and tribal reservations to devolved government as in Wales and Scotland;
(c) protection for minorities within a broad conception of a commonwealth, as in the vision for the European Union;
(d) with two world wars and the rise of economic and social globalisation, the realisation of a common human interest in the whole planet, which is in tension with the competing interests of more tightly defined groups (hence the rise and decline of the League of Nations and United Nations).

2. Reflections on handling difference constructively.

Underlying all these points is the view that we humans, whether religious or not, tend to define the world as 'them or us'. So I want to propose **seven theses** based on Christian teaching and thinking as to how we can better handle difference, and move away from being binary in our thinking.

2.1 **Difficulty with difference is rooted in fear**.

Fear of the other, fear of not belonging, fear of condemnation by God or others. Fear is why people look for certainty, the security of being in a system that tells them who they are and what to do, the security of knowing that God will save them from what they fear if they keep their side of the bargain, the religious or secular assurance of power over their weakness. There's also the fear that accepting someone who is different will contaminate you, will threaten morality and undermine your society.

Arguing with fear won't make much impact: it's not generally rational. What does make an impact on fearful people is love: love that accepts and allows a person to be who they really are, that enables them to come out of the darkness of fear into the light of reality: the love of God in Jesus Christ, and that love lived out in our lives. As the apostle John writes in the New Testament, 'We have known and believe the love that God has for us… there is no fear in love, but love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.' (I

John 4.16ff). The New Testament has many pictures of what the cross of Jesus means, such as dying for a friend, reconciliation of a relationship, buying us out of slavery, becoming part of God's family. It's the security of being received by a loving heavenly father, loved into family relationship, that allows us then to be challenged and changed. So a Christian approach to difference is to love people into the kingdom of God, without fear or favour, and to share that love with one another.

2.2 **It is wrong to expect the other person to pay the cost of my conscience.** In 2012 during the Olympics I was coming down the cathedral steps and heard an American preacher with a megaphone telling the innocent passersby and step-sitters, 'If you've had an abortion, God hates you'. I took issue with him on the basis of his unchristian words and unchristian gospel. He almost hit me. And last year in the Church of England's General Synod we considered a motion on the unethical nature of so-called 'conversion therapy', the conversion of gay people to straight people: there was nothing to fear from the motion if you were doing ethical client-centred therapy, but everything to fear if you were seeking to change the essence of what makes another person who they are in order to satisfy your own view of what is right. In the debate people were muddling up conversion as a free choice to come into relationship with God with conversion as something imposed from outside by other people.

These two examples share the reality that the person who thinks they have the truth **expects the other person to pay the cost of that truth**. Does God hate gay people who love each other, or do I? Does God hate women who have had abortions, or do I? Of course the ethical issues around abortion are complex, and that's the point: there is no easy answer, and those who say there is only one principle – to preserve life – expect girls and women to pay the price for their own principles.

Part of Christian witness is to affirm the power of love and acceptance, and part is to hold to the importance of prophecy and humility. We must confront injustice, while acknowledging our own failures to be just; we look for what builds up others for their benefit, rather than look for what makes us feel better at their expense. A mark of binary thinking is making other people pay the price for your conscience: do we bear the cost of justice, truth and love, or do we lay that burden on others?

2.3 **God and the world are untidy, and we have to be comfortable with it**.
Binary thinking is very satisfying for people of a particular character: right or wrong, give me the right answer, and then we should all be like that. One of my definitions of clergy is 'the people who go round tidying up the mess that God leaves behind', and much of the time we need not to worry about it – we should simply name the mess so people can understand and accept it, and stay with people in it. Jesus calls us to be creative lovers of God and neighbour, while our role models the Pharisees are too busy tidying it all up: the parable Jesus tells of the weeds in the harvest field (Matthew 13.24-30) pictures God caring for all the harvest with its weeds and imperfections, and doing the sorting out at the end of all things. It's not our job to judge people, but God's; and as Jesus reminds us, the measure with which you judge others shall be the measure which you yourself receive. Do we try to be more tidy than God is?

2.4 **Relationships with others are based on our relationship with God**.
In his letter to the Romans chapter 14, the apostle St Paul explores the issue of Christians with different attitudes to eating meat which has been devoted to idols, and in so doing says that we should not pass judgement on one another, but all live in honour of the Lord by whom we will be judged. From a secular perspective, this means accepting our equality before the law; from a Christian perspective, it's acknowledging that we are all loved by God and all fall short of who God wants us to be. Who am I to judge my neighbour? It doesn't mean that we have to agree: it does mean that we recognise that what holds us together is greater than what divides us.

Whether it's Brexit or Remain, the supporters of one football club over against another, or the Church debating homosexuality, the ability to encompass our neighbours who disagree, and not walk away, needs to be part of our common commitment to our shared world, and ultimately to the God to whom we all must give account. Relationships can be uncomfortable, but don't therefore have to be broken by disagreement.

2.5 **Walking away from each other is unreal**.

It can be tempting to walk off, to split away, when we have differences with others. It happens in all walks of life, where human pride or sincere disagreement push people apart. Whether in a church or a political party or a community group, splitting off can preserve my sense of purity, can restore my security and my boundaries, and puts me back in control, so I think, of my faith or my destiny. But not only will further splits come along as we make the world in our own image: we're not really split at all. It's unreal. We still live in the same spaces, we still have to get along somehow if life is to be worth living.

It's particularly bizarre from a Christian perspective. As the Papal preacher said at the opening service for General Synod in 2015, terrorists don't ask whether you're Catholic or Protestant, but kill you as a Christian. As Christians with different views, we still have the same Lord, and we meet round the Lord's table in the communion service. A former cathedral colleague of mine led a choir to a service in Antwerp Cathedral, and the Roman Catholic bishop invited him to join in leading communion He said to the bishop, 'I thought that wasn't allowed', and the bishop replied: 'It's not the Pope's Eucharist – it's Jesus Christ's Eucharist.' It's the Lord's table not ours. Even if we think we're doing the right thing by excluding the wrong people from our altar, Jesus doesn't think so – he's with the other lot just round the corner in their service too, uniting us all together. God, life and death make a mockery of all our human attempts to expel 'them' away from 'us', and of our pathetic pride in our own purity.

2.6 **The Church is a bonfire not a box**.

Any human organisation with a vision has to have principles and rules which define that vision, but which if followed to the letter destroy the vision itself. So the creeds which defined the early Christians over against pagans and heretics, and defined the Church of England against Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches at the Reformation, are not an IKEA manual for how to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, but are boundaries around a mystery. At the heart of the Church is the burning love of God in Jesus Christ: and like a bonfire, the heat and light don't stop at a boundary, but spread out a long way around so that people can be drawn inwards and warmed up and lit up with God's love. If we burn with the love of God, with a vision for the world, people will be drawn together. If we burn with zeal for defining boundary definitions, we enshrine difference and miss the point of the Christian Gospel.

2.7 **God's burning love is inclusive and challenging**.

When the Chapter of St Paul's published our vision and values statement in 2013, two clergy linked with the cathedral took me aside in some concern at having the word 'inclusive' in the statement. Their worry was that this was aligning St Paul's with the liberals in the church: the word 'inclusive' was, like 'godly' or 'traditional' or 'orthodox', the buzz-word of a partisan churchmanship, and it wasn't their party, so they felt excluded. I understood their concern, but pointed out that this was in the context of encouraging diversity, particularly the ethnic, gender, age and disability diversity in London; and also that the Chapter statement used a phrase, not a single word, to indicate that this is not about party membership. Our statement reads, 'to foster and encourage diversity, being inclusive and challenging to ourselves as well as others'.

Inclusive and challenging. That's how God works with us. It's being loved that makes us secure enough to be challenged. And that challenge works all ways: the intolerances of our age do indeed need challenging; and so does the Victorian culture of a bygone age that conservative people

mistake for Britishness or true church, and the patriarchal culture of the early church that blunted the radical and burning love of Jesus. As Richard Niebuhr noted in his book *Christ and Culture*, no culture is fully Christian, and Christ challenges all cultures – including the culture of the church or faith or secular body that we may belong to. And that challenge is focused on the burning love of God.

I want to conclude with some words from a little known author, Isaac the Syrian, a monk writing 1350 years ago in what's now northern Iraq, with a wonderful appreciation of the power of God's love and inclusion of difference, the God who created us different and can never stop loving anyone. This is some of what he said:

'As is a grain of sand weighed against a large amount of gold, so, in God, is the demand for equitable judgement weighed against his compassion. As a handful of sand in the boundless ocean, so are the sins of the flesh in comparison with God's providence and mercy. As a copious spring could not be stopped up with a handful of dust, so the creator's compassion cannot be conquered by the wickedness of his creatures.'

'Do not say that God is just… God's own son has revealed to us that he is before all things good and kind. He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. How can you call God just when you read the parable of the labourers in the vineyard and their wages? How can you call God just when you read the parable of the prodigal son who squanders his father's wealth in riotous living, and the moment he displays some nostalgia his father runs to him, throws his arms around his neck and gives him complete power over all his riches? It is not someone else who has told us this about God, so that we might have doubts. It is his own son himself. He bore this witness to God. Where is God's justice? Here, in the fact that we were sinners and Christ died for us.'

And that is a Christian response to difference. Thank you.