

9th November 2020

Dear Friends

Over last week when the news was full of the hullabaloo surrounding the American elections there was news of a death which made me pause for a moment, that of Jonathan Sacks the former chief rabbi of Great Britain.

I was familiar with his voice because he was one of the contributors to thought for the day on radio four. He spoke quietly and I always felt I was in the presence of a man who embodied wisdom and deep learning. I liked him and I was curious about him because Jews and Christians have so much in common. If you have ever visited a synagogue you may have been surprised like me by how very like a traditional non-conformist church it is.

Jonathan Sacks was a writer and author of books including, 'The dignity of difference'. The book was published in the early years of this century against the background of what historians were describing as the 'clash of civilisations' when the world was becoming a more dangerous place. Sacks was seeking a deeper listening to people who are different from us so that we can find common ground and overcome the divisions that prevent us recognising all that we have in common. You don't need to agree with everything he said to recognise that in our increasingly polarised world this message is increasingly urgent.

Seeking common ground with people who are different from us is not about denying our convictions even when these are disagreeable to someone else. It is about recognising the common humanity we share with people who are different from us. Seeking common ground doesn't require us to surrender our culture or identity and the things that make us who we are. It is about welcoming our neighbour.

Another way of exploring this theme is to talk about identity as being for or against. If I define my identity by who and what I am for then I can offer this as a gift to someone else. If I define my identity by who I am against then it's more likely I will make enemies, alienate people and find it harder to practise empathy. I may also be lonely.

I like this quote from Jonathan Sacks writing. 'The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognise God's image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals are different from mine. If I cannot, then I have made God in my image.' This is challenging because we are all damaged in one way or another and sometimes the people that cause us pain may be damaged in ways that we find hard to recognise or empathise with. We are damaged by our own capacity for sin and by the ways people sin against us. The promise of forgiveness, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive all who trespass against us; open the way for the image of God to be restored among us.

In scripture there are many examples of this challenge as people are compelled to come face to face with someone whose full humanity as an individual has been denied. There is Jacob waiting and wondering and very much afraid, waiting to see if Esau the brother he betrayed will recognise his humanity as a brother. There is Ruth taking her courage in her hands as she journeys with her Naomi, wondering if Naomi's people will welcome her as one of their own even though she is a Moabite. There is Jesus reminding the people of Nazareth that among their greatest prophets Elijah and Elisha found refuge and offered hope to people of other nations. There is Onesimus making a dangerous journey to see if his master would recognise his humanity as a brother in Christ and set him free even though he was a runaway slave. In these encounters there was the promise of hope and reconciliation and where people chose to embrace the difference they grew.

Welcoming difference is challenging for us because nearly everyone likes to be with people who are like them. At New North Road people have discovered the gift of welcoming people who are different from them and our community of Faith is stronger because we discover what we find in common through Jesus Christ whose gifts are forgiveness, hope and the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. We are for him and because we define who we are in this way, these things are our gifts to our neighbours. 'Taste and see that the Lord is good.' *Psalms 34 vs 8*

Your friend and pastor

Mark