

## Lent Compline Talks 2015

15 March Prof John Morris

### Conflict of Origins (ethnicity)

Tonight we turn to one of the conflicts that has beset the human race from its very origins. Indeed, it is obvious in the competition between many animal groups. As the election approaches politicians talk endlessly about 'foreigners' and 'immigrants'. This is the conflict of origin, or tribe and in the twentieth century we have seen hideous examples of this such as the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in the Congo. And it is not just race or tribe – one's very town of origin may be a source of discrimination.

We've already mentioned that Galilee was considered very rural and backward by the hoi-polloi in Jerusalem, with many rural people living in little more than caves according to archaeologists. Even within this community, Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, was considered very low in the pecking order. When Jesus was gathering disciples, Philip – who came from the more up-market Bethsaida – said to Nathaniel "here is the man spoken of by Moses in the Law – Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth"; "Nazareth", exclaimed Nathanael – can anything good come out of Nazareth?" The idea that Galilee was beyond the pale recurs repeatedly – At the festival in Jerusalem some said "This Jesus must certainly be the Messiah" others retorted "Surely the Messiah can't come from Galilee"; and when one of the temple police, Nicodemus (who visited Jesus at night) was arguing with the Pharisees that they should not pass judgement on Jesus without first giving him a hearing they said "Are you a Galilean too? Study the scriptures and you will find that prophets do not come from Galilee!" In part it was the way that people from Galilee spoke. You will remember that, during Jesus' trial before Caiaphas, when Peter was asked if he was a follower of Jesus a bystander said "Surely you are another of them, your accent gives you away!"

When we come to Jesus' relations with the Samaritans, I was originally tempted to refer to his attitude as 'racist'. There was clearly long-standing conflict between Jews and Samaritans; and Josephus reports violent confrontations between Jews and Samaritans throughout the first half of the first century. Samaritans claimed more 'authentically to conform to the religion of ancient Israel' because they remained there while the Jerusalem Jews were carried off to the Babylon in the period of exile, where some of their religious observance changed. Samaritans originated from the Ephraim and Manasseh tribes of Israel (each of which had been assigned a separate area of the conquered land by Joshua) and, as they grew, these tribes were becoming more and more separate. The Samaritans remained particularly separate because their chosen place to worship God was Mt Gerizim (indeed the tiny remnant still worship there), whereas for the Jews it had to be the Jerusalem temple. So this conflict was a mixture of tribal, locality and religious difference, and not just a different religion but two very similar religions both claiming authenticity. We only have to look at the N Ireland situation and the enmity between Catholic & Protestant; or go back to the European wars of religion to see how toxic that mixture can be.

Conflict between Jews (including Jesus) and Samaritans appears a number of times in the gospels. In one confrontation when Jesus stresses that what he is teaching is from God his father, some Jews turned on him "Are we not right that you are a Samaritan and that you are possessed?" When Jesus sent out the 12 disciples Matthew says he told them "Do not take the road to gentile lands, and do not enter any Samaritan town; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Now this could just have been practical evangelism BUT taken together it does suggest in Jesus a degree of hostility/antagonism to the Samaritans in particular. Indeed, in the early church Jesus' brother James – who was presumably as close as anyone to Jesus thinking – wanted Jesus' message to be exclusively for what were considered 'proper' Jews.

The antagonism with the Samaritans was mutual – Luke tells us that when Jesus was going to Jerusalem for the last time 'they went to a Samaritan village, but the villagers would not have him because he was going to Jerusalem'. However, John tells us that 'many Samaritans in that village came to believe' and he stayed there two days (presumably eating and drinking); 'For we have heard him ourselves; and we know that this is in truth the saviour of the world'

In the Sermon on the mount Jesus says 'Do not give dogs what is holy' – that sounds pretty innocent till you recall that, when he went to the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon a Canaanite

woman came to ask him to heal her daughter and got the response “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” pretty strong stuff which would get you arrested in 21<sup>st</sup> C UK – the woman must have been used to the epithet from a Jew because she replies “And yet the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the Master’s table.”

So Jesus’ attitude to the Samaritans at times seems little short of rudely antagonistic. When Jesus asks the Samaritan woman at the well for a drink she says “What, you a Jew ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman” (they were not allowed to use the same cups). She goes on “You Jews say God must be worshipped in Jerusalem, while we worship on this mountain.” Jesus says “It is from the Jews that salvation comes” but then he makes what I think is a more important point for us tonight “But the time approaches, indeed is already here, when those who are real worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth”.

Jesus also used the conflict with the Samaritans to make a point. When Jesus cured 10 men with leprosy, and only one came back to thank him “and he was a Samaritan” Jesus said “Could none of come back to give thanks to God except this foreigner”. You all remember the story of the ‘Good Samaritan’ – “he that showed mercy & kindness” and Jesus said “Go and do likewise”.

We say Jesus was truly human and truly divine. Like all other Jewish humans at that time, a part of him had clearly taken in the lessons of childhood that non-Jews and perhaps especially Samaritans were “other”, “foreign”, indeed little better than “dogs” (the language that ISIS now uses of anyone who does not follow their perverted form of Islam). But, at the same time, Jesus points us beyond our human and biological suspicion of anyone not of the same close family/tribe/colour/religious persuasion. The REAL key Jesus says is to love our neighbours; to show kindness to those considered “other”; to be good neighbours to any in need (not necessarily agreeing with their point of view); and to worship God, who is a spirit, in spirit and in truth – for “such are the worshippers the Father wants”. Indeed, after the resurrection, when Jesus is giving instructions to his disciples, he says “Go forth and make ALL NATIONS my disciples. No mention here of town, dialect, country, tribe, or colour.

This is His message for us. We are people of the resurrection; we are the people who, like those villagers in Samaria, can say “for we have heard him ourselves, and we know that He is, in truth, the saviour of the world”.