

Installation Service 9th June, 2021 @ 7.30pm Agape Centre, Lisburn Road, Belfast

PEOPLE FIRST, UNDER GOD

Growing up in the village as a child, storytelling was one main way we did before bedtime. *'In the beginning when people were not as tall as now...'*, a storyteller would begin. It was only a lot later in my life that I was introduced to another story of the beginning. That story is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. *'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...'* (Gen.1:1)

You don't have to read the whole story to know the key character of that story. It says that it is God who is that Person. From there on, the story of our beginning makes two things clear. First, that every living thing and every human being flows from, is accountable to, is sustained by, and is UNDER GOD; second, that all people are of equal value to God and are equally loved by God. God makes them in God's Image – *'Let us create human beings in our image'*. (Genesis1:26 &27)

The implication is clear enough. It is that people matter; different people; and all people matter to God: male and female, old and young, heterosexual and homosexual, girls and boys, rich and poor, single and married, widows and divorced, Christians and non-Christians, people of faith and those of none, black, brown and white people, citizens and foreigners, Jews and gentiles, every nation and tribe - great and small – are all equally important to God.

And - because all people matter to God - all people MUST and SHOULD matter especially to those who say they believe in God. For, when God, who takes on human flesh in Jesus, comes along and tells those He made in His image to *'...love your neighbour as yourself'* (Leviticus 19:18b; Mark 12:31), He is reminding us of this very fact that: PEOPLE MATTER – ALL PEOPLE. It is interesting that Jesus does not just reiterate this command. He adds on to it. There is no commandment greater than loving God and your neighbour.

Little wonder, therefore, that Paul admonishes Christians in Rome to, I quote, *'...accept one another just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God...'* (Romans 15:7) He is writing to a church with Jews and gentiles, slaves and free, rich and poor, and men and women living in a society which reflects the same diversity of peoples. *'Each of us should please our neighbours* (that word again) *for their good, to build them up for even Christ did not please himself.'*(Rom.15:2), Paul continues. Note that he says we should please our neighbours and we should do so for their good, not ours. *'We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves'* (Rom.15:1)

The sting in the tail of what Paul is urging the Church of Christ to do is in the two letter word *'as'* in his instruction, *'...accept one another as Christ accepted you...'* How did Christ accept you? Paul answers that question earlier in this letter to the Church in Rome: *'...while we were still sinners Christ died for us...'* (Rom.5:8) and *'He died for ALL ... So from now on we regard no one from a worldly perspective'* (2Cor.5:15 & 16). In other words it took selfless sacrifice – and in this case death – on the part of Christ to affirm that ALL PEOPLE matter to God.

Yet, even as I read that, you know as well as I do, that people are NOT EASY to deal with. People are difficult to live with – and that includes you and I. People are sly, vicious, critical, proud, envious, jealous, selfish, and hypocritical. And, for me, I don't know about you, what I find even more

challenging is the fact that other people don't think, behave, talk, believe, or look like me. Life would be a lot easier if they did, wont it?

That is the challenge I find with the notion that because people matter to God, they must and should matter to me. That is the difficulty I have with Paul's instruction to me to accept others as Christ has accepted me; to please my neighbours for their good; and to not please myself.

All of my Christian life, I have tried to work out how I can make difficult people count.

Let me share with you one way I have sought to do so. When I experience them to be so, I ask myself this one question: 'What does this difficult and challenging person teach me about myself, God, Christ, and especially about my calling to be a disciple (a follower and an ambassador) of Christ?'

Here is one thing I have learned as a result. I have often found that the person I find difficult to deal with is like a mirror. He or she reflects me to myself. By that I mean, I see something of myself in them: my pride, my stubbornness, my need to revenge, my desire to make a name for myself, my selfishness, and the list goes on . When that happens, it suddenly dawns on me that I am a PARTNER with them in the human condition. It is what the psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung calls the 'shadow' or dark-side of human beings.

Folks, I wonder if this ever enters our minds when we comfortably talk about 'partnership in mission' with other people! Or do we just think of their good ideas, resources, skills, efforts and works to make the world a better place? For, if we do just the latter, we are choosing to partner with only a part and not the whole of them. We are choosing to partner with only the part we are comfortable with. And in doing so we may also not be recognising and acknowledging the value of their shadow-selves to us...at least its agency as a reflector of ourselves, thus calling us to honest transformative discipleship.

Let me be totally honest with you. It is what difficult people make me see about myself – even if I am not aware of it at the time – that makes me uncomfortable with them. And yet, it is those very people - more than the easy-going ones - that are the unsung heroes of my discipleship. You see, they are the ones who make me take a closer look at myself and ask: 'where is my fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control?' What do I mean when I say I am a Christian? What does it mean to follow Christ? What does it look like in practice for me to accept them as Christ has accepted me? And whenever I have done so, I have understood more Jesus' call to me to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow him.

PEOPLE MATTER – ALL PEOPLE MATTER – even the ones that make life difficult for us.

In November 1987, I was a student at Edgehill College. An IRA bomb exploded in Enniskillen injuring a Gordon Wilson and killing his daughter Marie. Gordon chose to forgive instead of revenge. He chose peace over violence. In the darkness that engulfed the nation at that time, he made the shadow side of human being count - not for naught; but for something that honoured Christ with his life and in the world. He unleashed the potential for life that God has placed in human beings at creation. He decided to make a name for God rather than himself. He embraced the sacrificial way of God in Christ, who has not given up on people to fulfil their calling to be signs of God's grace on earth.

Gordon helped me see how, UNDER the influence of the Holy Spirit, people are enabled to relate to other people as God would. And, as the Holy Spirit does, she enables them to unleash the potential of life which God has put at the heart of His creation. She makes them become agents of life for all peoples regardless of the labels we put on them. She helps them to become a new creation in order to renew God's broken creation and to the praise of God.

As Mother Teresa once said about herself, ***'After all is said and done, I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing Go.'*** Under the Holy Spirit's influence, Gordon became a merchant of life rather than of death and destruction.

So here is a question I want us to engage with. What if the people in our churches saw themselves as ***'little pencils in the hand of a writing God'*** using them to write God's story of love and care, one for the other?

'I hear the sound of rustling in the leaves of the trees' is the first line of a song we heard earlier. I was introduced to it many years ago at Glengormley Methodist Church (outside Belfast). It inspired me no ends. ***'The church is here for healing of the nations'***, the song declares. Why? Because, according to the song, ***'The Spirit of the Lord has come down on the earth'***.

The refrain of the song still surfaces in my mind today more times than I care to count.

'My tongue will be the pen of a ready-writer

And what the Father gives to me I'll sing;

I only want to be his friend;

I only want to glorify the King'

So let me ask you. What would our Church look like if she works for the healing of divided nations and peoples; if she only thinks, desires and does things that glorified God, her Father; if she only speaks words God gives her to speak to heal the wounded, broken, and scarred hearts and lives; if only did what her Father tells her to heal divisions within and outside her; if her priority was blessing all peoples with concrete acts of kindness; if she sees her role as one of ONLY affirming her equal humanity with all peoples regardless of who they are, or what they've said, or what they've done; if she accepted and acted like black, brown, yellow, and white lives mattered equally in the church and outside it?

Let me put it another way. What would our Church look like if our primary concern was with the welfare of people and not colour, social class, or cultural and Religious background; nor nationality or gender, liturgy or dogma, policy or governance, theology or denomination, property or party political affiliation. What would our Church look like when names, and Sects and Parties fall and Christ is in all and all in Christ, because living under the influence of God, all people Matter? What would the church look like if many and diverse opinions and ways of life were accommodated within it? What would the Church look like if many, diverse, and different voices are given permission to speak, and are heard, and are allowed to influence policy and practice? What would our Church look like if full membership is defined simply as 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord' and nothing else?

Folks! I invite you to ponder these questions with me over the coming months; to ponder the risks that they may invite us to take for the sake of Christ; to ponder the glory of God which is at stake if we fail to take those risks; and to ponder the possibility of becoming totally irrelevant in the world.

On the other hand, I invite you to ponder with me the possibility and reality of the Church being people and places of either grace or nothing, where equal value and respect are accorded to ALL, and where no one tries to hammer holiness into another because it doesn't work; for only God works holiness in a person.

What I am inviting you to ponder with me is a people who preach the Good News of Jesus through word and deed; people who counsel and support the harassed, excluded, demeaned, exploited, and helpless; people who do not cherry pick who to include; people whose Christianity is big enough to contain Jesus who included the excluded; and people who allow the Holy Spirit to inscribe God's love into hearts and lives - so clearly and indelibly - that anyone could read it there.

That will be our story, when we do. That will be our letter of recommendation, written by no one else but 'the hand of our writing God'. That will be us saying no human being is more human than another. That will be us making people first, under God. That will be each of us being the change we wish, teach, preach and pray for, beginning right now and where he or she is.

This, for me, is who we are called to be. This is social holiness according to the Wesleyan tradition. This is Scriptural Holiness as I understand it. Partnering with God to give life where death prevails; to enhance life where it is diminished; to unleash the potential for life in everything and everyone God has created; and to make all people matter equally. In other words, ***'be a little pencil in the hands of a writing God'***.

Am I asking for perfection? How could I from a broken and flawed people like we are individually and collectively? So, no, I am not asking for perfection! I am just asking, in the famous words of William Carey the first English Baptist missionary to India, that we ***'attempt great things for God and expect great things from God'***. Yes, ***'there is a crack in everything'***, as Leonard Cohen sings. But that is not the end of the story. The good news is, ***'it is through the cracks that the light gets in.'***

May the light and love of Christ shine in our relationships with all peoples, to his honour and praise, Amen!

Rev. Dr Sahr John Yambasu

