



THE ARCHBISHOP  
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Archbishop Stephen writes in today's Daily Telegraph

Can there be any hope for our world, our nation, and for the Church when we face so many seemingly intractable differences and disagreements? Is difference the death of community? Must difference be feared?

A moment of fear experienced at an empty tomb on Easter dawn gives me great hope that difference can bring life rather than death.

In an early account of Jesus's resurrection, the first witnesses to the empty tomb don't respond with sighs of relief nor jumps for joy. Rather, they 'went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.'

They flee in holy fear because the dead do not rise. Jesus's resurrection is utterly unprecedented, so there's no way of 'processing' it. This awe-full moment proclaims that if Jesus is risen, then God's saving power is overwhelming.

These witnesses, three women, don't race away to hide. They flee to play their part in beginning a new community: a community that will be defined by the jaw-dropping wonder of Jesus's resurrection. A resurrection community, which we call the Church, that – despite its ever-present flaws – will strive to model a whole new way of living together.

It will refuse to treat difference as an obstacle to community and reject uniformity as the epitome of unity. Therefore, it will be seen often as both a nuisance and a threat to the world's usual standards.

How the Church looked and acted was (and is) regularly of greater concern to opponents than its theological claims. Some early critics of Christianity derided its remarkable social and cultural make-up as much as they derided its claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. The resurrection community – spreading without regard to geographical, political and social boundaries – became the most diverse institution in existence. And, confusingly, this diversity expressed the community's purpose rather than any ambition for power.

In this community, the outcast and powerless didn't merely hold equal status with the wealthy and influential: Christians were to give 'the greater honour to the inferior member.'

For all its impressive early growth, to many the resurrection community looked ridiculous and doomed. The philosopher Celsus mocked that the Church brimmed with 'only foolish and low individuals, and persons devoid of perception, and slaves, and women, and children'. Christians, he scoffed, appeared to reject the 'wise or prudent' in favour of the 'ignorant or unintelligent,...the silly, and the mean, and the stupid, with women and children.'

So how did this community gather such disreputable difference into unity? The Bible reveals that this was hard (and imperfectly) won. Yet the

New Testament speaks of a unity that is not blandly uniform but full of life-giving difference: from Jesus's ethnically (and morally) diverse family tree with which it opens to Revelation's description of a 'great multitude' before God 'from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.'

When the Holy Spirit comes in the book Acts, the diverse origins of the crowd are explicitly listed ('Parthians, Medes, [etc]'). The apostles then communicate with those gathered in their own different languages, rather than merging them into a single universal tongue. Those differences do not threaten the community: rather, God uses them to build community.

The New Testament's letters are full of the struggles and strains of communities navigating differences. But Paul, who wrote many of them, strongly criticises those imposing alien uniformities onto cultural differences. In one passage, he describes the resurrection community as a beautiful unity in Christ that isn't a uniformity: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' Paul doesn't deny these distinctions exist around him. He teaches that the superiority of one over the other, which was completely unquestioned in his culture, was to be rejected. Those differences would not be merged nor erased, but transformed into a new and diverse unity 'in Christ'. Many centuries later, we are still working out the full implications of this while learning from our painful failures.

The Church has never lost the gift of causing irritation, however. When the Archbishop of Canterbury and I argue for the establishment of safe and legal routes for refugees to enter the UK this is not about playing party politics, far from it, but rather a deep and considered plea from the very core of Christian faith. Though Christians – myself included – so often fall short of what we preach, my prayer is that in politics, in our communities, and in the Church we might first approach difference by seeking the gift that is so often within it. Difference can be approached with inquisitiveness, openness and humility, before our minds turn to addressing any problems. The temptation to declare difference intractable and to stop listening to each other must be rejected.

There is no naïve hope in Christianity that everyone's simply going to get along. Instead, there is a fervent belief that God is drawing us together (whether we like it or not), even despite ourselves. We are called to look upon those who are different to us first with hope and delight, rather than fear and suspicion.

That moment of fear at the empty tomb still propels Christians into that new way of living together. This Easter, I encourage you to peer into the empty tomb and be filled with awe. Jesus' resurrection means that difference need not mean death, but rather new life and new community. This is good news for the communities in which we live, for our nation, for our world, and for every one of us.

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