

Sermon Sunday 21 July (9th after Pentecost):

Series on paradigm change, part 2 Social Belonging

This is the second in a sermon series on particular themes as we find ourselves in a postmodern environment – if we think of historical times of western cultures as divided into several large eras:

- Antiquity
- The Middle Ages, into early 1600s (ie the 17th century)
- The Modern period from the early 1600s, especially since the so-called Enlightenment period from about 1750 onwards, and
- The Emerging/ Postmodern period (which characterises our present world, and which seems to be speeding up exponentially).

I said that the common assumptions about life and faith have changed drastically over these three times zones, and to illustrate we're looking at several themes:

- Our selves (last week)
- **Our sense of social belonging (today)**

Then, in the coming weeks:

- Truth and values
- Worldview and the unknown
- Society and Faith

So today: How we experience our social belonging

But before that, I said last week I'd say something more about paradigm shift, i.e. these broad changes in culture and understanding of the world.

Thomas Kuhn noticed that there seems to be jumps in scientific thinking: a particular view of things can be regarded as normal and even self-evident for generations or centuries, even though there may be some evidence against it. And then there can be a sudden shift in thinking within a generation or two, and say 50 years later a change has occurred so that a totally new set of assumptions – a new paradigm, as Kuhn called it, has replaced the old.

One of the examples he cites is the heliocentric solar system; i.e. the view of the planets moving around the sun, and not the sun moving around the earth (and if you think about it – the idea of the sun moving around the earth is an entirely common sense way of looking at things: we still talk about sunrise and sunset). The sun-centred system was first suggested around 250 BC but everyone, or almost everyone at the time, thought it was ridiculous. One of the reasons it was thought to be ridiculous is that if it were true, the earth would have to be rotating very fast to give us day and night, and as anyone who'd been on a horse or in a chariot knew, you feel the wind on your face when you go very fast. So if the earth was rotating,

imagine the gale we'd be in all the time! Any consideration that the atmosphere itself might be rotating was dismissed as doubly stupid. So the idea that the earth was at the centre, with the sun and moon revolving around us, persisted for a good 1800 years till the time of Copernicus, in the mid 16th century. Then, within two generations, not just the scientific community but people in general had changed their understandings, and a new calendar had been promulgated by the pope (35 years before the trial of Galileo, by the way) to take account of this changed understanding of the world. This is what Kuhn called a paradigm shift, and it was caused not by new evidence or a previously unknown theory, but simply because (a) the old theory had become too complicated to be tenable any longer; and (b) the last generation who'd clung to the old theory had died off.

So let's look, very briefly, at how our sense of social belonging has changed (and this does overlap a bit with what I was saying last week).

In the Middle Ages, everyone belonged – to a village, a town, a church community, and often a trade guild or one sort of another – so the ways of life and work were handed on through generations, determining who a person chose (or was chosen – because these decisions were often made communally) to marry for example. People were not free in our modern sense, but everyone knew his or her place and allotted role in society. And there was a sense of security in that. If people didn't belong here

– people from other villages or towns or countries or religions, for example – they generally belonged somewhere else. There were cases of people who didn't, or weren't allowed to, belong. In England, Jewish people didn't belong for several hundred years, from the time of King Edward I (1290) to Oliver Cromwell in the mid-17th century. When Jewish people did (sort of) belong, prior to their expulsion from England in 1290, their belonging was tolerated rather than welcomed, and their sense of belonging came from their own community life.

In the early modern period, up to the mid-20th century, belonging came to be shaped not so much by local community as by nationality, and within nations, the church or churches people belonged to. People lived and worked in ever larger contexts, and tended to be seen as individuals who make our own decisions rather than members of a community that made their decisions for them. We came to see ourselves in this light – so we started to decide who we'd marry, where we'd live, what job we'd do, and what political or religious opinion we'd follow. This is a very different world from the Middle Ages. But it's not the emerging world, for us now. The emerging world is still a spectrum of open possibilities, and we do have some say in where we go with this.

The danger now is of a return to tribalism, people sorting themselves into groups based on one or another marker of identity, and with tribes separate from and hostile to other 'tribes.' Often this is a response of those individuals or groups who feel

disempowered in some way, not listened to or disenfranchised – even if they actually do have the legal right to vote and the protection of the law. We saw something of this in the 6th January insurrection in the US after Trump lost the last presidential election – a populist reaction to perceived privilege. And the gunman last weekend, described by commentators as a ‘loner’, was presumably motivated by something similar, some sense of not really belonging. Often this tribalism, or isolation of individuals, is a local reaction to perceived centralised power. That becomes the source of resentment.

The other possibility, the more positive one in my opinion, is growing local and global networks based on neighbourliness in particular places. Electronic communications can actually help us build neighbourliness if we allow them to. Though I’m not as optimistic about this as I used to be. I used to think there could never be another world war because we’re so connected with people across national boundaries, but I’ve found that electronic boundaries can be put up very effectively: I used to correspond by email with a friend in Russia, but after the start of the Ukraine war I find I’m no longer getting any answers to my messages. More recently, just last week in fact, one of my two post-grad students set up a three-way zoom link between himself and myself and a Russian colleague, but it had to be done through a Polish email address. This is why I’m no longer so optimistic about international connections as a safeguard against international conflict.

Now I'm not going to try to make some connexion with today's readings, except to say that 'sheep without a shepherd' sounds like a fair description of the disaffection we see around us at times; and neighbourliness is pretty close to the central concerns of God's kingdom. Whatever ways we can find to build local connections - across mutually exclusive boundaries of identity - is to be welcomed.