



**The Inclusive Church Annual Lecture
2017**

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Including the Exclusive: how liberal can you be?

St Pauls' Cathedral

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Notes:

The lecture can be viewed on the Inclusive Church YouTube channel:

<https://youtu.be/9WRnHUfemig>

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21/7/17

- We had an election recently.... Did anyone have election hustings in a church or cathedral near you? How did you decide who participated and who didn't? Where do you draw the line on who's allowed...
- Student unions are increasingly barring speakers they think they don't want to hear.
- On the Radio 4 Sunday morning programme on 2nd July there was a report about Billy Graham's son Franklin going to Blackpool and objections at his anti-gay and anti-Muslim views: 'we are open to free speech not hate speech'.
- Conservative evangelicals threatened to boycott the opening of General Synod two weeks ago because of the welcome given to the Bishop of Edinburgh, who had led the debate for legitimising gay marriage in the Scottish Episcopal Church.
- 'Biblically responsible US investment funds are screening out companies deemed to be participating in the LGBTQ lifestyle.' [*Inspire Investment Group - article 5 Mar 2017 FT Iain Anderson Christian LGBT writer/exec chair Cicero Group*]

These are examples of the intractably complex human problem of whether and how we can manage to live together with difference, and specifically: how do we include in humanity those who exclude us or others from their concerns? And do we nonetheless exclude the exclusive in our practice?

I set up this lecture to reflect on the immediate Christian problem which was part of the impetus of the founding of this group, Inclusive Church. It is, when you begin to delve into it, an impossibly ambitious aim: so my disclaimer at the beginning is that in 45 minutes it's only possible to begin addressing this

question. And I'm not going to explore the very complex political and philosophical discourse about this issue which has gone on since time immemorial, in which I am no expert. I'm not taking a philosophical approach but a Christian one, to help inform the work of this organisation. How I'm going to structure the lecture is to reflect briefly on seven wider human issues around difference; then to look at how the contemporary situation for Inclusive Church might relate to these; and then to offer seven further reflections on Christian ways to handle difference as constructively as possible. And if you can remember all 21 points you'll be doing well!

Please note that nothing I say will be a final word: as we go along, you will be thinking of lots of things I haven't said, and of other points of view – and that's good and right, and so you should: I know there's a lot more to be said. Any lecture or view can only be partial. But I also hope that I will say a few things which will help you in your thinking about difference, and thus help to change what you may do for the better – which is the outcome which every good lecture or sermon should have: not just to understand the world better, but by God's grace to change the world including ourselves. The subtitle of this lecture is addressed to everyone in this room: how liberal can you be? And that's not just a question about the limits of our own love and generosity: it's also a question about the relationship between love and justice for others, and how we defend those who are vulnerable from being abused by others – and perhaps abused by ourselves.

1. What are the wider human issues around difference?

We have to start with the history of humanity – tribes competing to survive in a hostile world full of predators and other groups. Our animal and humanoid ancestors learned that co-operation is a good survival strategy, up to a point:

the herd, the flock, a pride of lions, all competing with other groups for resources – too many of one kind leads to over-use of resources and a collapse in population (which may be what's facing our human world in due course).

It's in this context that we've learned to form our identity: we relate to a manageable number but avoid being overwhelmed: our **community sizes** are something like this, with the church equivalent as an example:

- family/kin/close friends → home group/leadership group
- village of around 100 neighbours we can know with strong shared interests → church
- town of hundreds more acquaintances like us → deanery/groups of churches
- city of different groups including different identities → local ecumenical/interfaith relationships
- country with weaker shared identity but in stronger sub-regions → denominations/faiths
- world of competing countries/groups → other religions/subsets of own religion
- universe of one shared equal and common humanity: which we may or may not believe in theory (so racists may deny our equal humanity); and may or may not practice in how we treat others ('I love humanity, it's people I can't stand').

Here are **seven particular features** of why this makes handling difference difficult for human beings:

1.1. We are naturally **Tribal** and NOT inclusive: Them and Us is built into our DNA. We define ourselves over against others, as different but not equal

(‘who is my neighbour?’); we regard ourselves as explicitly or implicitly better (and implicit and hidden is harder to deal with). Tribes have to define themselves by having boundaries, by excluding others: so exclusion is a normal part of our inherited humanity, and our identity is formed through it, not through relating to all humanity: an inclusive identity is unnatural, and an inclusive rather than tribal church is pretty difficult.

1.2. **Community versus individual**: when the survival and cohesion of the community is threatened, the will and rights of the individual matter little. Hence the use of external war and conflict as a tool for compliance and internal unity by threatened rulers: e.g. emphasising the threat from republican Napoleonic France was part of the late eighteenth century ruling classes’ strategy for staving off revolution in England, along with putting heroic statues in St Paul’s for the lower orders to emulate (you’ll see some of them on your way out).

1.3. Community thinking is nearly always **conservative** – ‘it’s worked in the past’, ‘we keep together’, ‘change is difficult’. But change in response to changes in the environment has to happen if a community isn’t to become extinct – leading to the phenomenon of changing while insisting that we’re really not changing – cf attitudes to contraception since the early 20th century. And a way of coping with change when we don’t think we should be changing is to see our changes as the appropriate application of consistent principles in changing circumstances, as climate and culture and science and populations change: as the Church of England puts it rather elegantly, we proclaim the unchanging gospel afresh in each generation; or as both Brexiteers and Remainers have it, we are going to do what is consistent with us being truly British, even if that is interpreted in completely contradictory terms.

1.4. Uncontrolled **individuality** is seen as a threat by tribes and communities, and potentially as a betrayal of the group. On the other hand, creative individuality and non-compliance (e.g. Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Galileo, Luther, Lenin) can bring alternative solutions and possibilities which can enhance the survival chances of the community or tribe. At some point the tribe has to choose between keeping the traditions of the past and so dwindling or dying out unless conditions revert to what they were before (think of the Amish, and how many Shakers have you met?), or adapting to the future but losing some of what has up till then made them distinctively themselves by changing their identity (think of the Jewish people in the diaspora). And because individual people change at different speeds and have different attitudes to change, there is always an instability in tribes and communities, which if not being expressed in open conflict is nonetheless lurking below the surface as a constant source of anxiety.

1.5. The community needs a **common ideology** and a **shared story** around which to coalesce. Commitment to a shared goal or god, to divine kingship or democracy, to liberty, fraternity and equality or to British values of pragmatism and tolerance, to an army or a sports team, gives us a sense of common identity. The question at stake for inclusion and exclusion is how tightly those community ideologies and stories are defined: for example, more of the United Kingdom could come together around the Olympics in 2012 despite them being in London (which is regarded as out of touch and 'other' by many in other parts of the country) because it was a truly national team in the Olympics, and it did well, which helped; whereas trying to bring people together around rugby or cricket appeals to a more limited section of the population. The more the common story and beliefs are shared, the stronger the sense of community.

A particular issue here is how much leeway is given to non-compliance with the common ideology and story of the group. The British have always prided themselves on their tolerance and their acceptance of eccentricity and individualism: but there are limits, often subtly controlling ones – you can play the fool, but you mustn't threaten social class and manners; you can busk next to a queue, but woe betide you if you try to jump it; you can be a republican, but you must love the Queen; you can come from a different ethnic group, but don't get above your station. Where are the community's non-negotiable values and beliefs and attitudes, and what happens to those who question or go beyond them?

1.6. There's a built-in **emotional tension** in human beings between the *drive to belong*, to be part of a group, and the *drive to discover your individual identity*, which is an often overwhelming tension in adolescence, and which forms the plot of countless stories, novels and films. The son or daughter rebels against their parents, the dissident or prophet stands up against social norms. You will have your own experiences and memories of the conflicts which you went through in order to balance fitting into the group and finding your own identity. Many of them may be painful: but that's a normal if not universal human experience.

1.7. The handling of difference within and between communities is generally regarded as a **zero-sum power game**. If I get my way, you won't get yours: my gain is your loss, and vice-versa. The concept of justice and its handmaid equality (before the law) is in theory the way to address this. But the question there is: where does your justice come from?

Each year the deans of the Church of England have a very hard-working and gruelling conference after Easter. In 2013 it was in Westminster, and we had

a visit to the Supreme Court when we asked the law lords that question: where do your values in making judgements come from, and how do you know what is right and reasonable when looking at social questions such as the role and status of women, abortion or gay rights? And the answer was that they listen to what people are saying and thinking, and take that as their guide to what people in our society think is reasonable justice. That's realistic – we know how people's views have changed, so for example sentencing people to be transported because they stole a loaf of bread to feed themselves is no longer thought to be reasonable: but the danger is that justice becomes a matter of power not principle, with the supposed majority or the articulate minority imposing their will on others.

We know this too in our personal relationships and our own communities. One person's beliefs, choices, identity and lifestyle can conflict with those of another: how free are we to find and live out our own lifestyle or identity? The boundaries between what the individual sees as good for themselves, what a group sees as good for its members, and what is society's common good, are continually contested, and always will be. Sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, paying taxes, religious observance, the grey vote and the pink pound, political creeds, Brexit and many more – how do we survive as a country and a world in the midst of so many competing interests and cultures?

Secular and religious responses to these power problems of difference have over history included:

- open conflict, conquest, persecution or genocide to eradicate difference, assimilate it, or deny it and drive it underground;
- separate development based on a relatively narrow view of nationalism, culture or creed: leading to the growth of nation states, apartheid, or limited self-government from Roman satraps through Ottoman millets and tribal

reservations to devolved government as in Wales and Scotland; and maybe linked with the religious sphere, for example in the Reformation, with theologies going different ways in partnership with political and national differences;

- protection for minorities by legislation within a broad conception of a commonwealth, as in the vision for the European Union;
- with two world wars and the rise of economic and social globalisation, the realisation of a common human interest in the whole planet, which is in tension with the competing interests of more tightly defined groups (hence the rise and decline of the League of Nations/United Nations).

2. Those are seven general features of difference, inclusion and exclusion: how does the situation faced by Inclusive Church relate to these?

2.1. **Tribalism:** if Them and Us is a normal default position, where is Inclusive Church? You are presumably the Us who also includes the Them. But if Them don't want to be Us, does that leave Us as yet another tribe with its boundaries and exclusions? And of course you're not the only group that sees itself as being Us and open to Them – so what makes you different?

The way I put it for St Paul's is that we are the Cathedral Church for both the first Church of England priest to marry his husband, and the Rector of St Helen's Bishopsgate who regards the Cathedral as a place of false teaching. Our commitment at St Paul's is to include everyone in the Diocese of London, of whatever view, indeed to be the Christian cathedral for people of all faiths and none in the Diocese. But that doesn't mean compromising our witness to Jesus Christ. Nor does it mean we have no boundaries: like St Paul, we can be all things to all people for the sake of the gospel within the limits the

gospel sets – or else we have no gospel to share. The view of conservative evangelicals and catholics may be that we have gone beyond the limits of the gospel; and my view is that some of the beliefs and practices of conservatives go beyond the limits of the gospel and include erroneous teaching. But I'm not going to stop being in fellowship with them, even if they decide not to be with me.

I'll come back in the final section with a further thought on this: just to note here that Inclusive Church must be just that, inclusive, and avoid any temptation to be Us over against Them, however tempting and self-righteous it may feel.

2.2. Community versus individual: groups that feel under threat pay much less attention to the needs of individuals, whether inside or outside them. For Inclusive Church, I suspect that the sense of threat to you as a group is not that strong, and therefore you can allow yourselves to be more generous to those who disagree with what you stand for. But the corollary of that is that threatened groups in the Church not only see you as an organisation as more of a threat than before, but will tend to bear down on individuals in their group who are also members of Inclusive Church or sympathetic towards you. Debates within the Evangelical Group on General Synod (EGGS) are linked with this, with a move towards a harder line on true evangelical identity which is in tension with the wish to include all evangelicals of different views within EGGS. Quite how keeping EGGS in one basket will play out we don't yet know, but your contribution can be to support individuals who are under pressure to conform to a harder line than they would accept, to stay in and witness to alternative validly scriptural and gospel views within an evangelical or catholic context.

And you will also need to keep supporting gay and other Christians who are involved in groups and cultures outside the Church which point to the failings and inadequacies of the Church as evidence as to why those Christians should give up on being followers of Christ, and support them in their witness and work for the love of God in Christ in the world outside the Church.

2.3. **Conservative thinking:** groups facing change resist it as long as possible, and then try to do change with the minimum of appearing to be different. There are two ways to help groups change: one is to look for continuity with the past, in particular **affirming as much as possible the basic principles** which those groups uphold, in order to help break the hold of past over present culture. We'll come back to this again later: but it means in scriptural debates, for example, concentrating not on particular culturally oriented behaviours but on the underlying theological principles, in the way that the radicalism of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 and Galatians 3.28 undergirds the ordination of women and the outlawing of slavery, as opposed to Paul's culturally related practical instructions in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14.

The other way to help groups manage change is to **pursue the truth:** because God is found in reality, in what is true, and not in our partial views and self-serving constructions of the truth. What is the reality of our present situation? Honesty about who we are, about how the Church in various ways has colluded to hide the truth about its human sexuality, about the evidence from science, history and cultural studies, is all important in helping us – all of us, including us in this room – to come to clearer understanding of God's will for our lives. Hence the importance of the work proposed by the bishops over the next few years, and the need for it to be done with rigorous honesty, and monitored by as many groups as possible to ensure that it is honestly truthful, rather than a fudge which tells us or others what we already think or want to

hear rather than what is the case.

2.4. Individuality, tension and change: these will be issues within Inclusive Church as in other groups. How do you stay together and decide what you're going to do? How do you cope with different ideas and strong personalities and nuances of belief? What does someone have to do to get thrown out of Inclusive Church? And what do you do if someone walks away? The commitment to the group can be in tension with a person's sense of their own integrity: particularly in a group with Inclusive in its title, seeking to include others also means those who are members of the group accepting the disciplines that go with being included, and making space for others. Acknowledge any underlying anxiety about different views, and it will make handling disagreement easier; pretend such anxiety is not there, and it will come out in unhealthy ways.

The other thing to note under this heading is the concept of **Good Disagreement**. Some in conservative groups have attacked the whole idea as unchristian, because one side in an argument must be right and the other wrong – more on that in a moment. But Good Disagreement isn't about content but about process: how do we disagree well, without rancour or aggression, whatever the disagreement may be about? Good disagreement is important, and not only in dialogue with those coming from other positions: you will need it in your own group life together as well.

2.5. Common ideology and shared story: in his wonderful book *The Dignity of Difference* published 15 years ago, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks sets out the western paradigm of what he calls **Plato's Ghost**: the idea that there is one view of reality with which all must agree, or be wrong. And despite having four gospels, the Church has tended to follow that view that truth is monolithic,

rather than paradoxical. The Church has tended to see truth as self-consistent and dogmatically coherent, and that there are eternal principles which define and shape it: depending on your emphasis this might be scripture, holiness, submission, tradition or something else. The key feature is that this view of truth enables the division of humanity into right and wrong. Which is what gets us into difficulties with handling difference: if truth is dogmatic and you're right or wrong, then you can't have good disagreement because one side must be right and good and the other side wrong and bad. And if Inclusive Church or its members see truth as dogmatic, and those who think differently as wrong, then it will end up in the same bind.

The answer for us of course lies in the **Christian revelation**: of God revealed as the creator of one human race; of the scriptures revealed as the messy story of part of God's untidy interaction with humanity, where there are more loose ends than neatly tied-up certainties; and, above all, God's self-disclosure in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The truth is **not propositional, but relational**; the Word of God is **not a book, but a Person**. To be Inclusive Church means to have a common ideology of God and humanity and **a shared story which includes everyone else**, even if some of them don't include you or me – because even if they don't like it they are still part of the same story. So when in dispute with others, don't argue the toss over dogma (such argument is noted as fruitless in the letters to Timothy, for example, so it's scriptural to avoid it) but point rather to how we build loving relationship with God and neighbour in Jesus Christ, in the holiness of love.

2.6. **Emotional tension between belonging and individual identity**: one of the main reasons you exist as a group is in my view to give people **space to be loved** and to belong and thus to find ourselves and our identity as we are in Jesus Christ – not to subsume who we are into a prior construct of what the

Church expects us to be, but to keep becoming the Christ-like Spirit-filled whole and holy person that God has made each of us to be, as witnesses to God's endless capacity for difference and for love.

Christians who are changing their minds about what they think about the role and ordination of women or gay people find it hard to say so because they **fear that they will be ostracised and expelled**, whether formally or informally, from the group to which they belong which maintains a different corporate view, whether it's Forward in Faith or EGGs or Evangelical Alliance. And could that also possibly be true of Inclusive Church? Are you completely a safe space for others? For you are a group like other groups, and will have similar attitudes and pathologies lurking under the surface of commitment to generosity to all. The Diocese of London is fairly united around a commitment to generous orthodoxy, but the amount of emphasis given to 'generosity' or 'orthodoxy' differs markedly between different groups: what are your own limits as Inclusive Church, and what is your orthodoxy? We'll come back to that shortly.

2.7. Power and justice: the reports of General Synod two weeks ago and responses on "both sides" indicate that we fall into the trap of seeing what goes on in the Church as a power game which we seek to win. I spoke earlier under this heading about the problem of defining what is just and reasonable in a society which doesn't look to God for its values; and to be fair, even when the Law of God has been part of the law of the state, power has manipulated justice and religion. Which is why the role of prophets is always important: to proclaim the values of God over against the practices of society. That matters, all ways round. For prophecy is not just what I do to confront injustice and wrong: it's also what other people do to confront my collusion in injustice and wrong. You can't have your prophetic cake and throw it at others – like

Ezekiel and John of Patmos, you have to eat it and think it's sweet, when it will make your stomach bitter. The only way to exercise power well is to do so with humility, not only seeking to know what God looks for in how we live, but also admitting our own fallibility and need to listen to others.

In 2012 I was coming down the steps of St Paul's during the Olympics in my cassock and heard an American preacher with a megaphone slagging off St Paul's for telling lies about him, and telling the innocent passersby and step-sitters, 'If you've had an abortion, God hates you'. I took issue with him on the basis of his unchristian words and unchristian gospel. He almost hit me. But I was reminded of that in General Synod when we considered the motion on the unethical nature of so-called 'conversion therapy': there was nothing to fear from the motion if you were doing ethical client-centred exploratory therapy, but everything to fear if you were seeking to impose something onto someone else to satisfy your own view of what is right. People were muddling up conversion as a free choice to come into relationship with Christ and allow Christ to change you into who you truly are, with conversion as a change imposed from outside by other people to the essence of what makes you who you are.

The commonality in these two things is that the person who thinks they have the truth **expects the other person to pay the cost of that truth**. Does God hate women who have had abortions? Is God that exclusive? Doesn't God hate the men who got them pregnant too? Of course the ethical issues are complex, and that's the point: there is no easy answer, and those who say there is only one principle – to preserve life – expect girls and women to pay the price for their principle.

So although part of your witness as Inclusive Church is to the power of love

and acceptance, it also has to be to the importance of prophecy and humility. We must confront injustice, while acknowledging our own failures to be just; we look for what builds up others for their benefit, rather than what makes us feel better at their expense. A mark of unacceptable exclusivity is making other people pay the price for your conscience: do we bear the cost, or do we make others bear the cost, of justice, truth and love?

3. Reflections on handling difference constructively.

I want to conclude with **seven theses** on aspects of handling difference.

3.1 Difficulty with difference is rooted in fear.

Fear of the other, fear of being wrong, fear of not belonging, fear of condemnation by God or others. That's one reason why people look for certainty, the security of being in a system that tells them who and what they are and what to do, the security of knowing that God will save them from what they fear if they keep their side of the bargain, the assurance of power. There's also the fear that being inclusive will legitimate ungodly conduct and threaten proper Christian morality.

Arguing with fear won't make much impact. Nor will an appeal to reality. The mindset is that, if you're not healed, it's because you have hidden sin or insufficient faith – so you must try harder, or give up, or convince yourself that reality isn't what it really is. What will make an impact on fearful people is love: love that accepts and allows a person to be who they really are, and begin to come out of their fear into the light of reality: the love of God in Jesus Christ, and that love lived out in our lives. 'We have known and believe the love that God has for us... there is no fear in love, but love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached

perfection in love.’ (I John 4.16ff). So the task of Inclusive Church is to love people into the kingdom of Christ, without fear or favour, and to share that love with one another.

3.2 God is untidy, and we have to be comfortable with it.

One of my definitions of clergy is ‘the people who go round tidying up the mess that God leaves behind’, and much of the time we need not to worry about it – we should simply name the mess so people can understand and accept it, and stay with people in it. Jesus shows us how to be creative lovers of God and neighbour, while our role models the Pharisees are too busy tidying it all up: the parable of the weeds in the harvest field (Matthew 13.24-30) pictures God caring for all the harvest, and doing the sorting out at the end of all things. It’s not our job to judge people, but God’s.

3.3 Because truth is relational, Jesus and people must be our focus.

It’s interesting that the basic conservative evangelical model of atonement is penal substitution, the paying of a penalty of condemnation, avoiding punishment; when in the New Testament there are more in the way of personal pictures of atonement, such as dying for us, reconciliation of a relationship, buying us out of slavery, becoming part of God’s family. It’s that security of being received by the prodigal father, loved into family relationship, that allows us then to be challenged and changed: the Gospel begins with love, not fear.

3.4 Relationships with others are rooted in our accountability to God.

In Romans 14 Paul explores the issue of eating meat, and in so doing says that we should not pass judgement on one another, but live in honour of the Lord in whom we live and to whom we give account. Whether it’s EGGS or Inclusive Church, the ability to encompass people who disagree sincerely as

followers of Jesus needs to be part of our Christian DNA. Relationships can be uncomfortable, but don't thereby have to be broken.

3.5 Walking away from each other as Christians is unreal.

Having a split can preserve my sense of purity, it can restore my security and my boundaries, it puts me back in control, so I think, of my faith. But not only will further splits come along as we make church in our own image: we're not really split at all. As the Papal preacher said at the opening service for General Synod in 2015, terrorists don't ask whether you're Catholic or Protestant or Exclusive Brethren, but kill you as a Christian. Not only do we stand or die together for our faith, but we have the same Lord, and we meet round the Lord's table in the Eucharist – it's the Lord's table not ours. Even if we think we're doing the right thing by excluding the wrong people from our altar, Jesus doesn't – he's with the other lot just round the corner in their service too, uniting us all together. Hence the importance of Open Table as a witness to the untidiness of God and the inclusive love of Christ.

3.6 The Church is a bonfire not a box.

The creeds and the dogmas which defined the Church over against the pagans and heretics in the fourth century, and defined the Church of England against Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches at the Reformation, are boundaries around a mystery, not an IKEA manual for how to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. At the heart of the Church is the burning love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord: and like a bonfire, the heat and light don't stop at a boundary, but spread out a long way around so that people can be drawn inwards and warmed up and lit up for Christ. If we burn with the love of God, people will be drawn in. If we burn with zeal for defining the boundary definitions, we have missed the point of the Gospel.

3.7 God's burning love is inclusive and challenging.

When the Chapter of St Paul's published our vision and values statement in 2013, two clergy linked with the cathedral took me aside in some concern at having the word 'inclusive' in the statement. Their worry was that this was aligning St Paul's with the liberals in the church: the word 'inclusive' was, like 'godly' or 'traditional' or 'orthodox', the buzz-word of a partisan churchmanship, and it wasn't their party, so they felt excluded. I understood their concern, but pointed out that this was in the context of encouraging diversity (which meant for us particularly ethnic, gender, age and disability diversity in a diverse London, as we already had diverse sexuality which they might not be aware of); and also that the Chapter statement used a phrase, rather than a single word, in order to clarify that this was about substance not party membership. The last of our values reads, 'to foster and encourage diversity, being inclusive and challenging to ourselves as well as others'.

Inclusive and challenging. That's how God works with us. It's being loved that roots us enough to be challenged. And that challenge works for all: as conservatives will argue, the spirit of the age does indeed need challenging; and so does the Victorian culture of a bygone age that conservative churchmen mistake for the true church, and the patriarchal culture of the early church and its scriptures that blunted the radical and burning love of Jesus. As Richard Niebuhr noted in his book *Christ and Culture*, no culture is fully Christian, and Christ challenges all cultures – including the culture of Inclusive Church.

Inclusive Church has done much to open up Christian faith to those on the margins, and support those who struggle with the exclusive attitudes of some inside and outside the Church. And in my dreams you would change your name to Inclusive and Challenging Church, as you pursue your role of

promoting and sharing love and justice in Christ's name, pursuing the burning love of God.

I want to conclude with some words from a little known but profound ascetic theologian, hung up on sex as most monks were, yet with a wonderful appreciation of the power of God's love and inclusion which stretches even to hell, where souls turning their backs on God are tormented, not by demons, but by receiving the burning love of God when they have rejected it – for God can never stop loving anyone. Isaac the Syrian wrote in the late 600s in what's now northern Iraq, and this is some of what he said:

'As is a grain of sand weighed against a large amount of gold, so, in God, is the demand for equitable judgement weighed against his compassion. As a handful of sand in the boundless ocean, so are the sins of the flesh in comparison with God's providence and mercy. As a copious spring could not be stopped up with a handful of dust, so the creator's compassion cannot be conquered by the wickedness of his creatures.'

'Do not say that God is just... God's own son has revealed to us that he is before all things good and kind. He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. How can you call God just when you read the parable of the labourers in the vineyard and their wages? How can you call God just when you read the parable of the prodigal son who squanders his father's wealth in riotous living, and the moment he displays some nostalgia his father runs to him, throws his arms around his neck and gives him complete power over all his riches? It is not someone else who has told us this about God, so that we might have doubts. It is his own son himself. He bore this witness to God. Where is God's justice? Here, in the fact that we were sinners and Christ died for us.'

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