

Citizens of Heaven: Identity, Inclusion and the Church

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I have a simple agenda tonight. I want to change the question we're all asking. I say 'we' and 'all' because my sense is that those who advocate the inclusive church agenda and those who most vehemently oppose it are currently asking the same question, and the reason they're at odds is because they're giving different answers. My counsel to those who are glad to bear the epithet 'inclusive' is not to shout their answer louder or longer than the opposition, or give examples of the pain and suffering the opposing answer has caused, or suggest that the arc of history bends towards their position, and thereby win the argument; it's instead to ask a different question. A similar question – but a subtly different question. I believe if we get the question right, the answer and the argument will largely look after themselves.

'Are you a Londoner?' a journalist asked me recently. I found it a hard question to answer. I grew up in the West Country, although none of my family lives there now. I was born in Canada, although my parents weren't there very long. My mother was a refugee from Berlin, although her parents weren't German. My father lived in London for several years, as did my sister, although they each moved away in their early thirties. I lived in America for many years, although never planned to settle there permanently. I've now lived in London longer than anywhere else in my adult life – but I somehow resist being pinned down to having to support Spurs or Arsenal or pining for the sound of Bow Bells.

So when Theresa May said at the Conservative Party conference in 2016, 'If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere,' I wondered if she was talking to me. Whatever you think about her accusation, she certainly put her finger on something important. A recent book claims the significant divide in British politics is not between capitalism and socialism, but 'between the people who see the world from Anywhere and the people who see it from Somewhere.' (David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The New Tribes Shaping British Politics*)

'Anywheres' dominate British culture and society. They thrive at school, go to prestigious universities, work in cities at some stage, marry late, and populate the cultural élites. They're self-made. They're proud of being tolerant, meritocratic, egalitarian, autonomous, open to change, internationalist and individualist. They often live a long way from their parents. They comprise about 25% of the population, and almost all voted Remain.

'Somewheres' are about 50% of the population. Their identity is designated: they are Scottish farmer, a working-class Geordie, a Cornish housewife. They mostly live within 20 miles of where they lived when they were 14. They are generally more local in outlook, communitarian, stable, patriotic, traditional, mindful of security and tied to specific places. They have larger families, and give more to charity. (If you've got a tidy mind and are wondering about the other 25%, they're the In-Betweeners.)

David Goodhart, the author of the book, contrasts what work means to the respective groups. Anywheres work because they seek a good income and wish to exercise their skills. Somewheres obviously need income, but are much more concerned to contribute to the lives of others, both family and the wider public. There's an irony that Anywheres proclaim the equality of diverse family structures, but themselves tend to live in stable nuclear families; whereas Somewheres tend to have a more conservative view of the home but their actual domestic lives tend to be less stable. The paradox of our society, in these terms, is that we're a population largely made up of Somewheres, whose cultural, educational, commercial and political leaders are mostly made up of Anywheres.

Rather than argue over the details of this analysis, I want tonight to highlight the significance of Goodhart's argument for the issues that concern Inclusive Church. The key point, which the Scottish independence and Brexit votes both revealed, is that our lives are more centred on identity and belonging than on ideas or convictions. The experience of unemployment is of course about loss of income, but even more about not knowing who we are or where we belong. The great decisions of our lives are seldom prudent calculations of benefit and risk, and more often gut-level realisations

of our true character and the people who we want and need around us. Our family and friends are those who most fully know who we are and see things about us that we hide from ourselves. The great debates of our day aren't fundamentally about human rights or economic benefits or legitimate migration or coarsening public discourse: they're about profound identity, deep belonging, and about how we each can find a balance between securing our own sense of who we are while appreciating and encouraging the flourishing of those whose identity and belonging is different from our own.

It's into this context that Paul in his letter to the Philippians speaks some powerful words. In the midst of controversy over the person of Jesus Christ and over what kind of lifestyle was faithful to his legacy, Paul announces a revolution in our notions of identity and belonging. He says, 'Our citizenship is in heaven.' (Php 3:20) I want to pause for a moment to recognise how transformational those words really are, for Anywheres and Somewheres alike. Paul literally shifts the centre of the universe, from this existence and our daily reality, to the realm of essence, the things that last forever, the habitation of God and of those whom God has called to share the life of eternity. Rather than earth being the source and testing ground of truth and coherence, the measure of all things becomes heaven. When we're assessing whether something is right or wrong, the question now is, does it stand the test of eternity? Will it abide with God forever? Or does it belong to the world that is passing away?

Consider the cliché of our time, 'I hear where you're coming from.' When we're confronted with a disputatious work colleague or an enervating in-law or a troublesome fellow passenger on a bus, and we have the will to come alongside them but still somehow win the argument, we say, with a hint of understanding perceptible within our weariness, 'Look, mate, I see where you're coming from...' and then we show that we really do appreciate what's making them act in this exasperating way. But there's always a 'but,' and sure enough after a short or long time we eventually say, 'But see what it looks like for me,' sometimes adding an indefinite number of people around me or like me, clearly the vast majority, disadvantaged or distressed by our interlocutor's behaviour, and we subtly suggest that our perspective is better, wiser, more comprehensive and more authoritative, and must prevail. You could say that's our cultural problem today: we're not really hearing where each other are coming from.

But Paul takes this kind of argument and spins it around 180 degrees. By saying we're citizens of heaven, he's saying, 'It's not finally about where you're coming from – it's about *where you're going*.' This is the transformation I want my remarks tonight to commend. See what a colossal transformation it involves. If we try to reconcile where we're coming from, we'll never manage it – we'll be defeated by difference, deflated by diversity, discouraged by divergence. That all changes if we follow Paul and start to concentrate on where we're going. We're going to heaven – where there is more than enough love for all, more than enough joy, more than enough truth, more than enough space for everyone to flourish. So we arrive at a definition of the church: a bunch of people who all come from different places but are all going to the same place. Yes it's interesting where we're coming from. But in the end that names irreconcilable difference and damaging diversity. What's vital is where we're going, a space where diversity is our biggest asset and a kaleidoscope is a sign of abundance.

So being a Christian transforms our identity. No longer are we trying to assert our assumptions as normal, demanding that everyone hear how much we've suffered to ensure they excuse our eccentricities, imposing our prejudices on others so we never have to be challenged or changed. Now we're a people pooling our resources for a journey we make together to a place none of us have ever been. There are no experts, because we're all citizens of a country we've never visited and longing for a home we've never known. How do we prepare for that journey?

Well, we start by consulting the guidebook. In the guidebook we start to learn a new language, begin to practise new habits, commence making new companions. For example we stop saying 'life isn't a rehearsal' – because actually it is – or 'life's too short' – because the life that really matters goes on forever. We stop taking the largest piece of pie or the biggest slice of cake because we believe we're all one body and you eating is the same as me eating, and we recognise that there isn't a shortage of the things that matter, so helping ourselves to the biggest slice is a sign of lack of faith in the plenitude of God. We cease making ourselves omniscient because we know that for a

community to flourish, everyone has moments when they need to ask for help and moments when they're in a position to offer help. We cease seeing others as a threat and start to perceive the ways in which they're a gift.

Once we've got this new language, new habits and new companions, we can explore the next stage. And that's living as if we were already there. The experience of what it's like to feel like you're already in heaven is what we call the kingdom of God. Living as if we were already in heaven means being able to sit together in silence, because silence is no longer dead time but time in which we are most fully aware that God, rather than us, is the major actor in history, and we're blessed to be created by one in whose eyes we are precious, honoured and loved. It means keeping Sabbath, because Sabbath is a constant experience of not striving to secure our own salvation but resting in the grace that all the real work has already been done by God. It means sharing in worship in a way that recognises that we all bring different things to the table but receive back the same. It means seeking to help others while being constantly aware of the ways in which they are helping you. It means never doing things for people that they can perfectly well do for themselves, because affirming another person's humanity and agency is the first form of compassion.

And when we've got used to living as if we were already in heaven, there's only one more step to take: and that's to let go of our own belonging, release our constant effort to establish and maintain our own identity, and instead allow ourselves to be wholly owned by God. This is of course what baptism enacts. But it's no simple thing. You may know the story of the man who fell off the cliff. Somehow, as he fell, he clung on to a branch growing out of the rocky edge. Desperate, he shouted, 'Is anybody up there?' After a pause, a quiet voice said, 'My son, I am with you. Let go of the branch and I am here.' He thought for a moment and finally shouted, 'Is anybody else up there?' It's no simple thing to give up our own identity and allow our belonging to be refashioned. But it's the secret of eternal life.

The quest to discover where we're each coming from is a never-ending and finally fruitless one. The turn to realise where we're all going is a life-giving and joyful one. As Paul in Philippians puts it, the Holy Spirit is turning the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of Christ's glory. That's real transformation. That's what being a Christian is all about.

I want now to add a second dimension to my argument. Having made a plea that we transfer our attention from where we're coming from to where we're going, I want to suggest that at the same time we transfer our emphasis from the wrongs we've suffered to the glory that awaits us. Shifting from Philippians 3 to Matthew 11, we recall the Baptist's understandable question. 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus had a simple answer. 'The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.'

Now those who are glad to call themselves inclusive are won by the rhetoric but a bit chary about the details. For example at my church we're not sure about the blind receiving their sight: we focus on how people with visual impairment develop extraordinary depth of insight in other ways. Likewise with the deaf: we're keen to focus on a person's assets rather than define them by their deficits. We'd probably make an exception for raising the dead – where the pastoral needs justified it, of course. We're all for upholding the poor, but we'd be anxious to hear what the poor had to say for themselves before assuming the only good news in their lives was the news that came from us. But in spite of our inhibitions, we still see miracles. We still see the Holy Spirit do unbelievable things.

It's hard to categorise Alzheimer's. Once we've developed your scheme, by which there's *disability*, which we seek to live with, think beyond, understand, even befriend, and *illness*, which we seek to overcome, withstand, and not be defined by, then we have to work out in which category to put Alzheimer's. And we'd better decide pretty quickly because Alzheimer's is fast taking over. It hides itself away because those with the condition become less likely to enter public spaces. For that reason it's almost an invisible condition.

When I came to St Martin's one woman stood out. You couldn't miss her. She would shout up from the congregation at unexpected moments. If you quoted Ecclesiasticus and said 'Let us now praise famous men,' you wouldn't get as far as 'and our fathers that begat us' without her shouting up, 'And what about the women?' It was like a tripwire. If the role of preacher and presider one Sunday were

both taken by men, you could be sure that as you greeted her at the door she would look at you with her withering gaze and say, 'Have you forgotten about the women?' There was no use arguing about taking turns and cherishing the gifts of all. She was a single-issue fanatic.

Although it wasn't just one issue. She had the same seek-and-destroy guided-missile approach when it came to vegetarianism. Rare was the congregation member who'd not been cornered by her strong handshake, pleading escape from her vice-like grip as she 'talked and explained the scriptures' as far as they made the consumption of meat unconscionable. From everything I was told, dementia hadn't made her a vigilante: she'd always been like that. If anything, her faltering faculties slightly reduced her passionate advocacy and scaled the volume down just a little.

She came to the first two evenings we organised around Dementia and Faith. She listened as people spoke movingly about caring for a beloved husband or mother and absorbingly about how dementia works and how its varieties differ. But then she made it clear she believed we could do better. She buttonholed two friends and hatched a plan. Over two lunches together they spoke and the two friends wrote things down, about her, about her life, about her mother, about her condition.

And so it was that we beheld her glory. On the third dementia evening, she stood behind a lectern. In her hands were four pages of notes, typed out by her two friends from their conversations. And then she began to speak. Slowly, and with extraordinary dignity, she told us her story. And what a story. 'Mummy was Baroness von Hundelshausen. She spoke six languages. I was born in Mexico and brought to Britain as a baby.' She went on to speak of the 'battle': 'Jesus made it very clear that women are equal and not to be pushed around by men. But women's role in life and society has always been undervalued and must be equalised.'

She went on to speak of working for a newspaper and taking it over a few years later. 'It was really lovely because I could say anything I wanted to say.' She talked of being elected as a councillor for Westminster, and making sure that Buckingham Palace paid local taxes – which it had never done before. She talked of being radicalised by her mother's dementia, and realising 'the Government didn't give a damn about old women.'

But then, astonishingly, she spoke about her own experience of Alzheimer's. 'Fear and anger can be very close together, especially when you have memory problems, and I was angry.' She explained what we'd all experienced of being with her. 'I hate people deciding for me or speaking for me. I want people to understand that I'm still me, I still have a sense of self and my own rights.'

How awesome is the sight. Here was the one brought to Jesus through the roof by friends carrying a stretcher – through the roof of ignorance, prejudice, impatience and hasty judgement. And in that moment I saw what prophetic ministry means. Not berating authorities, not denouncing congregations, not excoriating government; but slowly, patiently, building sufficient trust with a person who is socially excluded, not assuming that one has to speak on their behalf, but over a transformative meal, listening, taking notes, assembling thoughts, so that one day, with a fair wind and a sympathetic audience, that person could speak her own words, sing her true song, and let the whole room thud with the sound of jaws dropping. They that wait upon the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles. That night I saw a miracle. I saw what church can be.

I want to reflect with you on that story in the light of my contention that the key question isn't where we're coming from but where we're going. The key theological theme of what we might call the inclusive movement in the church has been the doctrine of creation. The simple message has been to point out that all things are bright and beautiful and God made them every one. It's an attractive message but it's a flawed one because there are clearly things God's made that aren't bright or beautiful, both in the actions of the created order and the dynamics of human desire. What the inclusive message is really doing is to highlight significant elements that have long been attributed to the fallen creation and reallocate them to the original creation. To use the terms I employed earlier, this becomes an argument about where scripturally we're coming from, or in which silo of Genesis 1-3 we best belong. But the key strategy that tends to accompany this theological theme is that of pointing out the plight of those who've been allocated to the wrong silo, having been treated by some combination of church and society as fallen, flawed and sinful when they were in fact created, different and beautiful. The strategy works by appealing to reactions on a spectrum from pity via tolerance to justice, all of which are problematic.

They're problematic for three reasons. First, in pointing to the need to include minority identities, they collude with the false distinction between the divergent and the normal, and with the *noblesse oblige* argument that the privileged and normal should do the decent thing and allow the divergent and strange a place at the table. This is an understandable but unwise argument because the renewal of church and society is not about the justice of the fortunate sharing a bit more with the unfortunate, but with everyone realising how much they have impoverished themselves by failing to receive the abundant gifts being brought to them by one another. Meanwhile it retains the notion of first- and second-class citizens, only arguing that the table should have a place set for both, not just the former. This achieves inclusion but only as a form of patronisation and a retention of a sense of superiority and inferiority, which is a very damaging cost.

The strategy is problematic second, because the doctrine of creation is not the best place on which to ground a theology and ethic of diversity. It's simply too difficult to distinguish which things are glorious aspects of created order – such as the sight of a cheetah in full flow – which are the more troubling parts – such as the sight of that same cheetah disembowelling an antelope – and which are the more straightforwardly fallen parts – such as the hunter shooting the same cheetah as a trophy skin to hang on a wall. The doctrine of creation has been used to justify many deeply perverse things, such as the superiority of one race over another, and I believe rather than reallocate identities from one silo to another the best strategy is to look elsewhere for a new perspective.

That elsewhere is eschatology. As I've maintained tonight, the point is not where we're coming from, it's where we're going. Where we're going is a working name for eschatology. I've just pointed out that what's needed is for everyone to recognise that they are impoverishing themselves by not opening their lives through practice, habit, law and relationship to receive the gifts of each other. That's called mutuality, reciprocity, or sometimes hospitality. But what eschatology adds to this is the realisation that God's kingdom is enriched by opening itself to the abundant diversity of creation, such that the life of God in eternity is not sufficiently imagined unless it is peopled with the full panoply of earthly human identities. In other words the *ethics* of inclusion are about each person acknowledging their own need and poverty and thus developing an appetite for broader relationship and connection; meanwhile the *theology* of inclusion is about God inviting all kinds and manner of persons to share in the banquet, not for their sake but for God's sake. God invites us all to be at the heavenly table, not because any of us have a right to be there, or because God is trying to set straight a historic injustice or present imbalance, but because God chooses never to be except to be with us in Christ, and that being-with is not a for-some-people thing but a for-everyone thing, and it's not a for-now thing it's a forever thing. Our way to live eschatologically is not to choose who we think will be joining us in eternity, as if we were predicting a sports team that hadn't yet been selected, it's to learn to live with everybody now and to receive their unexpected gifts with imagination and gratitude in recognition that these are the people with whom we'll be spending eternity, lucky and blessed as we all are to be there, and we'd best use these earthly years as a time for getting in the mood.

And that brings us to the third thing that's problematic about the conventional inclusive strategy. It too easily ends up being mostly about me. When the conversation is based around 'Are you coming from where I'm coming from?' there's an almost inevitable tendency for it to descend into 'And now I'm going to spend a very long time telling you all about how difficult and unfair and yet endlessly interesting it is to be me,' and my own experience becomes the principal example of every injustice and my own recognition and acknowledgement and acceptance and validation becomes the principal goal of all agitation. There's a serious and vital place for lament in ethics and liturgy, but lament is impoverished if it's wholly or largely about oneself and theology is impoverished if it's wholly or largely about lament. Meanwhile theology is undersold if it's mostly or entirely lament about society or the church and seldom if ever joy in the glory of God.

I recall hearing a Muslim leader say 'Everything God gives us is given that we may develop knowledge and mercy.' In other words, whatever our circumstances, whatever our disadvantages, sufferings, exclusions or oppressions, every single one of us can receive these conditions in such a way that builds up our understanding of ourselves and the world, and shapes our compassion for those we know and those beyond the circle of who we know, and thus, through such knowledge and mercy, we are shown the face of God. The cry of inclusive theology should not be 'People like me have suffered from both social disadvantage and ecclesial exclusion and it's not fair and I'm going

to go on and on about it till you change something.’ It should be ‘See what remarkable insights and wisdom people have offered the church about the character and the grace of God, often in spite of their disadvantage and sometimes because of it, and see how much the church, which can hardly claim it’s full to bursting with insight or wisdom, stands to be enriched by these gifts; surely it’s long past time the church should dismantle its deliberate or unconscious barriers to receiving these gifts – and this is how wondrous the church might be if only it would!’ Earlier I told the story of the woman with Alzheimer’s, not to demand that she and those who share her condition be included in a congregation, but to demonstrate what renewal a church can find and what glory in God it can experience if it can only find ways to receive such a person’s gifts. At the end of her story one can only wonder at what the love of God can do. That’s how the story should always end – and not by raging at the failures of the church, which will always be countless, or the grief of an individual, entirely justified and completely understandable as that grief may be.

Not long ago a friend lost her job working for a charity. She was heartbroken because she loved her job and she’d been suspecting for some time that her bosses were trying to ease her out. She felt she’d been unjustly treated and she got a lawyer to investigate. During the legal process she was told for the first time in her twenties, that she was autistic. This was a shock to her, though it made sense of some experiences and perceptions she’d long had. But it was more of a shock to the charity, who quickly realised their case against her was collapsing. They kept offering her more and more money to go away up to a really extraordinary sum. But my friend said, ‘I don’t want the money. It’s charity money – I don’t want to take it away from what it should really be spent on. I just want the job. I loved that job and I don’t believe whoever they put in my place will love and care about it anything like I did.’ I was so moved by her witness. It wasn’t ever about her. It was about gifts of God that were being denied, neglected and inhibited. Her faithfulness exposed an organisation that had forgotten what it stood for.

There’s a battle going on in the church right now, and it’s one of those good battles which in centuries to come the church will look back on as defining anew what it means to be a child of God and understanding afresh what God has in store for those who love the kingdom. I believe that the so-called inclusive side of this debate will win the argument, but I’ve set out my claims tonight because I’m concerned that if it wins the argument on the grounds that are currently most commonly advanced, it will win the argument at significant cost. To avoid misunderstanding I want to finish by going through the three stages of my argument one more time.

I suggest, first, that the question needs to change from ‘Where are you (singular) coming from?’ to ‘Where are we (plural) going?’ The change required is the transformation conferred by baptism. In baptism the individual stories of our creation are drawn together into the collective story of God’s kingdom. In the flawed creation, it’s never clear how our different shapes and characters and experiences and convictions will ever find peaceable coexistence. In the kingdom, God draws us into resurrection life, in which difference is translated into complementarity, polyphony into symphony, discordance into harmony, discord into concord, and dissonance into resonance. To concentrate on where we’re each coming from is like trying to create common ground without the grace of baptism; like assembling a human body from myriad distinct and separated muscles and bones. In the end, where we’re going is just plain more interesting than where we’re coming from; the one is limited by space, time and circumstance, the other is forever.

I suggest second, that such an argument as this is won by the side that tells the more compelling story. It’s no use to protest that treatment of certain identities has been unjust, unfair, heartless, cruel and sometimes criminal and worse. This is true, but it has the truth of lament rather than of aspiration. It leads to authorities and those of diverging convictions making grudging acknowledgements, procedural claims and evasive promises. It seldom changes hearts and minds; on the contrary it often wearies and antagonises, as the phrase ‘Are you calling me a bigot?’ illustrates. I told the story of the dementia and faith evening because it’s one of the most inspiring and amazing things I’ve ever experienced in a lifetime of involvement with the church, and I want to make the case that these are the epiphanies you open yourself up to if you recognise that God is giving the church everything it needs but the church too often finds itself unable to receive that abundance. You just have to open your heart and transform your habits and you will find such miracles a regular occurrence. This is what I mean by a more compelling story.

And I suggest, third, as a combination of the first two points, that there's an important role for personal narrative, the sharing of the pain of exclusion, the grief of talents wasted, identity scorned, gifts neglected and hurts endured. There's a place for feelings of injustice, calling-to-account for thoughtless, prejudiced and inhuman remarks and actions, protests against inexcusable disrespect, wilful ignorance, wrongheaded doctrine and distorted exegesis, and campaigns for changing language, liturgy, rules and conventions. But in the end this has to be not so much about me and my need to be noticed, appreciated, valued and cherished, as about the church's need to have a full and joyful understanding of God. The secular discourse of rights, justice and identity can be a good companion to Christians and can help clarify terminology and disentangle hurt from harm, difference from wrong. But it has no capacity for depicting a genuinely shared, glorious and worshipful future that we don't achieve but God brings us as a gift. In the kingdom there can't in the end be freedom for one that's not freedom for all. In the words of Nelson Mandela, 'As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.' The most convincing argument the inclusive movement has in the face of contrary views has to be, 'My understanding of God has room for you; but your understanding of God doesn't seem to have room for me.' Such a view can go on to say, 'Isn't the tragedy of our human life that so much of the time we don't have room for God; but yet the gift of the gospel is that, however difficult we make it and however reluctant we are, somehow God always has room for us.'

One day, we'll look back on this debate in the church and realise that this was the moment when we truly discovered what lay in store for us in the kingdom of God, and how we had the precious invitation in the power of the Spirit to model that beloved community now. One day we'll realise that this was the moment we finally recognised our calling as the church was to imitate the glorious breadth of the heart of God. One day we'll appreciate that this was when our limited understanding was made to be swept up by the joy of God's boundless imagination. May that day soon come.