

The world is getting ever smaller. It's also getting more crowded – as the global population rises. Forced migration is bound to increase even further as a result of climate change. It's my guess - as we've seen in recent years - that the world will become ever more **Polarised**, that people will become ever more 'tribal', - that trading systems will become ever more protectionist. Why do I say that? History tells us that when people feel threatened by some exterior agency, they cluster around the safety of like-minded individuals – and even aggressively protect their boundaries.

By **Polarised** I mean defended from others not like us. Tribal. Was it not a wake-up call yesterday when Vladimir Putin suggested Western Multiculturalism is dead?

Never before in my lifetime has there been such an urgent need for people to model a different way of dealing with the fear of the other. People like the apostles Peter and Paul – [who we remember today] - whose statues proudly flank the west door of the Abbey.

Why? – P&P grew up in and lived a highly polarised world BUT they came to demonstrate a very different way – the way of welcome and generosity – towards the other.

Their personal world - that had shaped their WHOLE lives from birth - was highly polarised. In their world people were Jews or Gentiles. Those chosen by God and those not chosen. That's a very stark Polarisation – I'm favoured by God, you're not. I'm heir to God's promise to Abraham - you're not.

That was the personal world of Peter and Paul until Jesus came on the scene. Jesus reminded them that God's promise to Abraham was actually a promise of favour to ALL people - not just the Jews. Through the faithfulness of Christ all are reconciled to God.

It was momentous, earth-shattering for Peter and Paul to change their personal world views. For Peter it started with a very vivid dream - Followed by a meeting with certain Gentiles upon whom God's favour was resting. And he found he couldn't argue with God. For Paul it started with a blinding encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus.

For Peter and Paul - the breaking down of barriers and the promotion of unity between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians – became a number one priority. Centuries of animosity, suspicion and fear found a fertile breeding

ground in arguments around circumcision / food laws and religious festivals. This led to polarisation on ethnic lines in the early church. Peter and Paul would not have it.

Nor would they have it HERE at the Abbey. Peter and Paul are important figures for us - given our Iconic status for the church in the city. This is a city welcoming people from all around the globe, with vast disparities of wealth, and a huge transitory student population - Polarising forces remain strong.

They are strong even in the church. Issues of sexuality, of women in leadership, of the nature of truth in Scripture, of salvation – still polarise – they still drive us in the church into our safe tribal groups. We're not immune from the prevailing culture – BUT we must be at the cutting edge of changing it by living Jesus-shaped lives.

In our gospel reading - Jesus said to those who would follow him – it's a tough call. Follow me and life will be uncomfortable, you can't follow me and keep looking back. The priorities of the kingdom of God challenge our personal and tribal boundaries.

The church in Galatia found this out big time

There were huge tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the church, so Paul writes - look guys *there is NO longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, there is no longer male or female – for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*. There is no hierarchy of specialness. He goes on – and I'm quoting from today's reading – *you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another – Slaves!* – He's driving the nail home hard. To remain tribal is a self-indulgence leading to the death of the true self. He reminds them of Jesus' command – *you shall love your neighbour as yourself, as yourself*.

We're hosting a Church leaders discussion and book launch on the 24th July with Steve Chalke. Steve is Baptist minister, a broadcaster, a leading Christian thinker and a social activist. He's also a controversial figure in church circles. Where the church is polarised around issues of scripture, salvation and human sexuality – it's often due to the way Paul's letters are interpreted. The first line of Paul's book is – *'I want to start a conversation about Paul the apostle'*. We're giving Steve a platform, not because we agree with everything he says – but because we want to start a conversation among Church leaders and among Christians. Please join us here – at the cutting edge of breaking down some of

the polarisations that plague us in the church. We have to do this if we're going to get any traction further afield, if our message is going to mean anything in a polarised world.

One of the principle benefits of gathering together in worship – is breaking down the Polarisations that plague us – we're challenged to love our neighbour as ourself – for we mean no more [*or less*] to God – than them.

In gathered worship – we welcome each other into our respective worlds – in the choirs children and adults demonstrate how they need each others voices to make the whole work, as we share the peace with a stranger or the brother or sister we disagree with Polarisations are challenged. As we kneel at the rail with no regard to our status in the world - as we we have coffee with Now who do you have coffee with? Having coffee together is part of our worship, those who provide and serve coffee are helping lead worship.

On this Patronal Festival – the greatest honour we can give to the apostles Peter and Paul – is to pledge, for another year, to proclaim and demonstrate the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ. A gospel which knows no boundaries, preferences no person or tribe. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.