



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Sixth Sunday of Easter

readings: [Acts 17.22-31](#), [1 Peter 3.13-22](#), [John 14.15-21](#)

14 May 2023

E.M.Forster may be a name familiar to you, perhaps best known for his 'ground breaking novels' of the early 1900's, which sought to challenge existing barriers in relation to class and race and sexuality; *A Passage to India* and *A Room with a View* come immediately to mind, both of which were made into films with stellar casts. Forster was very committed to the idea of human connection and mutual understanding, and it perhaps gets its strongest emphasis in his novel *Howard's End*, also an award-winning film. Central to the story is the character of Margaret Schlegel who longs for people to be able to reach out to each other and truly communicate. Significantly, the novel has at its very beginning, a short quote or epigraph, made up of only two words: 'Only Connect', only connect. Some of you might watch the quiz show of that name as competing teams look for connections and Forster was wanting to say that if you can only connect...if only you can connect, what is brought together will be enriched.

I begin with Forster and this desire to connect because our readings relate to this theme in different ways. In that first passage from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is in Athens, addressing the city's leading thinkers and is keen to make a connection with them.

He acknowledges their religious and philosophical orientation, making particular reference to one altar he has seen, whose dedication is to 'an unknown god'. Paul builds on this to talk about a God to whom we can relate as a child relates to a parent, and he does so by quoting those Greek thinkers with whom there seems to be a connection. 'In him we live & move & have our being' and 'For we too are his offspring' are words taken from ancient Greek writers and Paul quotes them as part of illustrating common ground with his audience; but he is also wanting to take them deeper, into relationship with the one in whom we are all connected.

Of course, if we read on, we learn that some of Paul's hearers scoffed at his words and we will know from our own experience that making the sorts of connections in which barriers are crossed and divides are bridged with people who see things differently to us can be far from straightforward. The gravity of our human frailty can make us resistant to what is really required in connecting with each other.

Nevertheless, it is striking that one of the dictionary definitions for that word 'connect' is 'to enable two or more disjointed parts to unite, to become one'. I say striking because such language starts to tread on sacred ground, & lead us towards the Christian doctrine of atonement, or, if you place the emphasis differently, of At-one-ment. By seeing our 'connecting' within this light, we begin to recognise that it is costly; it is costly, yet it is also possible; the story of Christ's Passion and Resurrection makes that all too clear.

And we get a vivid picture of this truth in that second reading from Peter's first letter. After offering words of encouragement to a community who is facing suspicion & hostility, Peter goes on to talk of how Christ, though put to death in the flesh, is made alive in the Spirit,

and went and proclaimed to the Spirits in prison. It's a rather curious set of verses, but it seems to be referring to Christ's descent into Hell, or to what is known as the harrowing of hell, as portrayed in medieval mystery plays and icons. If so, what is of interest and, I think, of significance is that in some of these icons, particularly from the Eastern tradition, Christ, having made the descent into hell, emerges from

the tomb on that first Easter Day, but not on his own. Rather, he is holding the hand of Adam, and in some cases that of Eve too, as he steps out into the light, treading down the gates of Hell, with its doors and locks scattered.

One leading Christian scholar, John Dominic Crossan argues that such iconography is, in fact, much closer to the original Gospel vision than that found primarily in the western tradition, in which Christ is portrayed as emerging from the tomb alone. And if we go with Crossan, we get a clear image of God in Christ, and through the figures of Adam & Eve, redeeming and raising all humanity. It presents a powerful vision of our connectedness to God and each other in which all that separates and divides us is defeated, even death itself.

And then finally to our Gospel, in which we are given a glimpse into the same connectedness that lies at the heart of God.

Jesus' is preparing his disciples for his departure, encouraging them in the face of the difficulties that lie ahead, and central to his message is his unity with his Father, to which, in today's passage, he adds the Holy Spirit. Such trinitarian language points us towards the dynamic relationship that is at the heart of God, a relationship that is constantly reaching out to us, inviting us into a fuller participation in God's life, and pointing us towards the truth that each of us finds our fullest expression where we connect; in the context of relationships, within community.

So what does all of this look like for us in practice? I think, for each of us, it is about reflecting on our connections, or lack of, of course, with others, especially those who are different to us, and making the effort to reach out.

As a University Chaplain, working daily in a context that is ecumenically Christian, inter-faith and secular, I see it in terms of bringing together students and staff in ways that try and help us all to understand each other better, and in that process to get glimpses of our connectedness with each other. That's not always easy but it feels important to do, and when it works well, it's real gift.

And it's also, of course, increasingly important to make connections with the wider creation from which we are worryingly disconnected. Only last week, I was part of leading a group on a Dawn Chorus Walk in Markeaton Park, taking time to listen to birds as well as to stand beneath some magnificent trees and feel the texture of the bark. The whole experience was totally uplifting for those who came along and made the cost of getting up at 4.30am well worthwhile.

And on a day that marks the beginning of Christian Aid Week, this time is an opportunity to make the connections between those who have power and influence and those who don't, and how we can play a part so that the dynamic can shift and enable justice can emerge.

The potential for us to 'only connect' can be seen in all sorts of places, and so as we continue our journey through this Eastertide, let us hold before us the truth that Christ's triumph over death and hell is a triumph over all that fragments and separates us from God and each other and indeed his whole creation. For the risen Christ invites us into a life in which, together, connected, we are made whole.

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