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Handling Difference

by Martin Robinson

There was both irony and coincidence in that, as the Church celebrated Pentecost and looked forward to Trinity Sunday this year, the news was dominated by the behaviour of two of Britain's more influential cultural icons. Despite the unfolding of tragic events in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Pakistan, both newspapers and television displayed a single-minded obsession with the exclusion of "Gazza" from the England World Cup team and the dramatic departure of "Ginger Spice" from the world's most famous pop group.

Taking Leave?

To some extent, we have grown used to high-profile (and highly paid) mega-stars working out their tensions and grievances on the public stage. Perhaps we secretly relish such spectacles. In a rootless and privatised culture, belonging and commitment, either in human relationships or in communities, is fast becoming alien to many people. A sudden breaking of ties, followed by self-indulgent behaviour, is simply a vivid expression of how the majority of our friends and neighbours might act in similar circumstances. This is one of the reasons why such cases are a gift to the media, as stories run and run with speculation and gossip.

What might Paul Gasgoine's absence from France '98 mean for those who were left in the team? Are the Spice Girls now finished without Geri Halliwell? In a strange way, their experience rings true for many of us.

Conflict and Koinonia

The saga of "Gazza" or "Ginger Spice" is a good place from which to begin reflecting on the mission of the Church, and how this mission is rooted in the nature of the triune God. For we cannot deny that, throughout its history, the Church has been responsible for some of the most appalling human conflicts which have ever been played out in the human arena. And whilst the Spanish Inquisition and the Crusades may be a thing of the past, the vexed disputes about gender and sexuality (particularly in relation to the ordained ministry), doctrinal differences between the denominations, or stand offs between bishops and politicians, all fuel the public's perception of what the Church is about. Society almost expects it, because it mirrors so much of what is going on in other spheres.

The paradox at the heart of all this, however, is that, in a culture which seems to thrive on pluralism and freedom of choice, there is a deep uneasiness – both

inside and outside the Church – about living with difference and diversity. New Labour's pager-carrying MPs all live with the daily reality of "keeping on message"; and in the realm of religious practice, it is not just the exotic fringe sects which control the flow of information among their members! From churches to political parties, from multinational corporations to pop groups, there seems to be a profound need to present an image of unanimity. Whilst this may be music to the ears of the spindocors, it increasingly removes from communities and institutions the basic skills of dealing creatively with tension and difference which are necessary for the good of any mature society.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Church. At times it seems as if we are a breeding ground for potential Gazzas and Ginger Spices, where those who differ storm out, or resort to immature, self-indulgent behaviour. Worse, however, is the all-pervasive tendency to ignore conflict, which may result in terminal damage to the life and outlook of a congregation. The minister who constantly chants the mantra "We Never Have Rows in this Church" is not only living in cloud-cuckoo land, but is walking blindly into a future battle zone which could overwhelm

or destroy. If the Church is serious in its intent to give a high priority to the welcoming of newcomers and enquirers, for example, it must expect that such people will bring their own expectations and experience with them. The resulting patient exploration of how their outlook differs from that of the established congregation is just as vital to the task of mission as the initial welcome and encouragement. The same could be said of any change and development, where strongly held and opposing attitudes dominate the church's engagement with the future, whether it involves buildings, organisation, finance or worship.

Trinity and Unity

If the life of the Church is rooted in the nature of God, it is vital that we come back to an imaginative and renewed understanding of the Trinity. For too long, the language we use to express what we believe about the life of God has been interpreted as meaning sameness. But the mystery of God's triune being does not mean indistinguishability. Rather, there is creative difference and a mutuality of opposites and complementarity, all of which is held together within the identity of the Godhead.

For now, we can never fully know the infinite cost of such a way of being, though we can catch glimpses of it in the suffering as well as the joy of all who are created in the divine likeness. Yet the Church's task of seeking to represent the life of God to the world is as urgent as ever. So too is the costly exploration of how this can be done amid the diverse mix of opposites which make up the local church.

Canon Alan Jones' description of the Trinity is, perhaps, a good starting point:

The doctrine of the Trinity begins to come alive for us when we can say with all honesty, "I cannot be me without you, and we cannot be us without them. Together we have a future". When human beings begin to believe this fundamental truth and act on it, prejudices are undermined and injustices denounced. The doctrine of the Trinity is, when properly understood, political dynamite.