

Wouldn't it be simpler ...

Wouldn't it be simpler if we all thought the same, shared the same values? Wouldn't it be good if we could share our good news with anyone, confident that they would rejoice with us? And if we were sad or grieving we could share that with other people too?

At this very moment (August 2014) we are seeing some of the drawbacks of such a belief played out in northern Iraq and the northern regions of sub-Saharan Africa, as fighters for extreme forms of Islam seek to impose their view on others. Advocates of the Islamic State and of Boko Haram appear to believe that the world would be simpler, and better, if everyone held the same beliefs as they do; and they believe that their religion requires them to achieve this state of affairs by force. No matter that many Muslims around the world react with utter revulsion to this concept, reminding us of the Qu'ranic declaration that 'there is no compulsion in religion'.

Some non-Muslims in the west have responded by attacking Muslim businesses and communities, perhaps out of fear, or on some other grounds. Community relations in our country are soured; the soil in which the weeds of fear and suspicion grow is given a hefty dose of fertilizer.

Much the same could be said of the situation faced by the Jewish community in the wake of the Israel attacks on Gaza. Dreadful though the consequences of those attacks are, is it justifiable to vent our frustration and anger on our own fellow-citizens who are Jewish? Will such a reaction do anything to solve the problem?

The history books are full of stories about dictatorships which sought to impose one view on everyone, tolerating no dissent. We shudder at the thoughts that come to mind.

Before we settle in to an unthinking mindset that is inclined to blame 'all them others', perhaps we should remind ourselves that in our not-too-distant past our own ancestors have rallied under the banner of uniformity. A few centuries ago Catholics persecuted Protestants and vice versa, Anglicans demanded that we all worship in the same way, Dissenters overthrew the monarch and tried to impose one view on us all.

Wouldn't it be simpler ... ? On second thoughts, perhaps not.

We are proud of our Parliamentary Democracy. Some of us may be impatient to see change, but we have learned to live together as the political climate changes, being governed by and governing those whose view on many things is different from our own. We try to commend democracy to others with different histories, thinking that it will solve problems at a stroke. But it is easy to overlook that important central issue: how do we deal with minorities, especially those who seem likely to be permanently a minority? In short, how do we deal with difference that can occasionally flare up into something alarming? If we neglect our tradition of care for those minorities who are different, what lessons are

they learning from us in readiness for the day when they might cease to be mere minorities?

In recent times (remember the Balkan wars of the 1990s?) many contrasting communities have lived and worked, rejoiced and wept, celebrated and mourned together – until one community began to blame the other for all their ills. Neighbours could no longer be neighbours; friends could no longer be friends; enmity ruled the day, with ghastly consequences.

Jesus recognized the problem of difference. His solution was a radical one, and it has yet to be bettered. Pray for your enemies; do good to those who persecute you. But Jesus' message was not simply one of being kind to everyone. There is a cross to take up. It won't always end happily.

Paul added a little more spice to the dish: rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We need to learn the language of love afresh so that people who need our support really know we are with them in the way they need us to be, not imposing upon them our picture of their world.