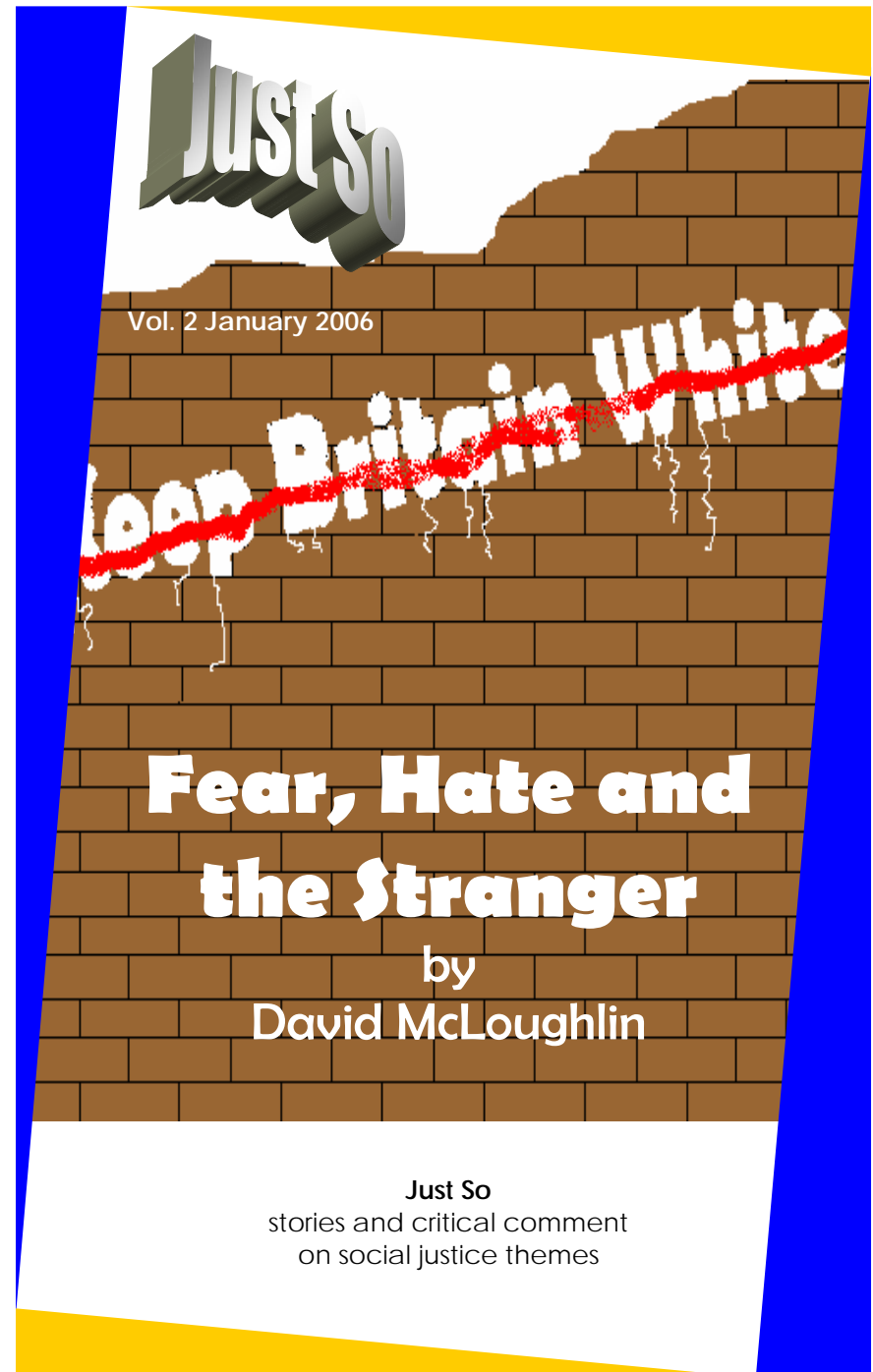


Just So is meant to be read and studied – by a wide range of people, both within the faith communities and in wider society. It is being circulated to churches and other faith groups, voluntary and community agencies, statutory organisations and local authority departments.

If you have any comments about the contents or want further copies, please contact John Paxton, Worcester Diocesan Social Responsibility Officer, at The Old Palace, Deansway, Worcester, WR1 2JE or by email jpaxton@cofe-worcester.org.uk.

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The Social Responsibility Officer
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Fear Hate and the Stranger

How we, as the disciples of Christ, encounter the world depends to a great extent on how we remember who and what we are. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera in his fascinating novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*¹ states: "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

The Church, as Temple of the Spirit, is no separate, holy enclave but seeks to replicate the theophany of Exodus where the presence of the unimagined, unexpected and strange God is revealed as "Yahweh", I am who I am". This is precisely not the God we can simply locate where it is convenient for us that God should be. The divine presence which John speaks of as "glory" in his Gospel is indeed a beautiful but also a terrible thing. Jesus' revealing of the Kingdom brought healing and reconciliation to many but also opposition, hate, fear and death. The solidarity that we have in the Spirit as Church always draws us into just such complexity. To quote a modern disciple who lived this to the end:

The hour when the Church today prays for the coming of God's kingdom drives it for better or for worse into the company of the earthlings and worldlings,

into a contract to be faithful to the earth, to its distress, its hunger and its dying.²

Who will remember the stories of the victims, of the feared and hated strangers if not the Church? In our worship of the strange God who came close and dwelt a stranger among us we become a truthful space hearing the word of God and the words of the poor in the one place. The solidarity of faith in Christ involves us in mutual support among unequals such that the world, at least in the liturgy, becomes a home for all. This involves the experience of gift or grace which Jesus taught in his stories, and enacted in his healings and meals. We become human not just by "making" ourselves but by allowing ourselves to be "made" by others, as in the story of Oscar Schindler and the Jewish workers he saved from the holocaust. The Church bears witness to this dynamic of gift in its worship and sacraments where we discover ourselves Christian by grace not virtue.

But where can ideas such as these be rehearsed, revisioned, renewed? I suggest that it is in the remembering that is at the heart of all Eucharist. "Blessed are those who are called to his supper" is a reference to all those who have gone before us and all those

things and are listened to in ways that well-intentioned private individuals will never be. There is a real need for such leadership at present. If the churches see their own leaders acting in this way then the members will be provoked to take leadership in their own communities of the office, the factory, the school, and the hospital.

Who can engage in serious ongoing conversations across the communities? Dialogue is demanding and slow and often frustrating and time consuming. But if we cannot give time to the stranger than perhaps we have little time for our strange God who seems to have a preferential concern for the stranger.

¹Kundera, M. (1980), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, London: Penguin Books, p.3

²Bonhoeffer, D (1958) *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.3, Muenchen: Kaiser Verlag p.274, cited in Fuellenbach, J. (2002), *Church: Community of the Kingdom*, NY: Orbis p.62

³Benjamin, W. (1969) *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, NY: Schocken Books, p.255

⁴Orwell, G. (1983) *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p.34

Among our communities there is a curious form of racism that in a subtle and minor way Mr Howard demonstrates. When my parents arrived from Ireland there were signs in Birmingham that read: "No dogs, no Irish". When the first Afro Caribbeans came they found coldness towards their natural exuberance but of course they spoke English, dressed well and enjoyed cricket. Then the next wave came from the Indian subcontinent initially speaking excellent English if worshipping strange Gods. As each wave settled and prospered they looked down on the one that followed moving out of the very districts that had been previously home to them. Now we have those who are Black and White and not English speaking, or hardly, but whose cultural and religious identity is very strong. The tensions between the migrant communities grow apace. The earlier waves of migrants and settlers themselves need reminding. The Catholic Church provided a West Indian Chaplaincy in Birmingham which has done wonderful work but why did West Indian Catholics not find a warm welcome in the predominantly Irish city parishes?

Who will empower? Who will give people the courage to be different? The Christian leaders of our communities can go to places and say

who are yet to come. Precisely not blessed are we – this little holy huddle of the just. In every Eucharist we are one with the victims of history, the faceless nameless masses who are, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, the makers of history. Our remembering of them alongside our remembering of the dangerous memory of Jesus is the continuation of their redemption in history, as we refuse to allow their memory to be annihilated.³ In the Eucharist we weave new bonds of solidarity across time and place.

Within the Eucharist we try to grasp the ever-changing moment in a wider horizon of shared significant memories. We remember the exodus of the Hebrew migrant workers. They were oppressed strangers in Egypt called out to freedom in a new land. We recall the words of the prophets, renaming the memory and rekindling its vision of freedom for all the powerless: the widow the orphan and the stranger. We celebrate the life and dying and the unexpected strange rising of Jesus, spelling out that freedom in one human life. And we remember the coming of the Spirit to enable the struggle for life, for freedom and dignity to continue. How we remember all this reflects our understanding of life's meaning. In George Orwell's terrifying vision of the future, 1984, the slogan of the Party, which controls

everyone and everything, is: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." 4

With no developed sense of memory we are helpless before the fear of the stranger, we lose any sense of solidarity and of the possibilities of collective social transformation for ourselves, for those who come among us, but also for the victims who went before.

Paul Ricoeur in his work *Time and Narrative* (1985) argues that it is narrative, the significant stories we tell again and again, which enable us to find meaning in time. In Eucharist we bring our remembrance of our time and the remembrance of the story of God in Christ together. In this dual remembering, his story and ours merge and mutually interpenetrate one another provoking us to find renewed shared meaning in the time in which we live. We do this remembering in a variety of loci and groups: our unions, the community of scholarship, our families, but above all the weekly Eucharist.

Our remembering of the past in liturgy is of a past still present, a *kairos* time whose influence and effect still endures. The memory enkindles hope that the reality of life in Christ can

there is council housing suffering from ten years or more of inadequate local government investment in the housing stock. Just such a situation occurred in Stoke on Trent, where an old peoples home was adapted and decorated, provoking local residents in substandard housing to rise up in fury. Not surprising but then our remembrance needs to be of all the powerless alongside the stranger.

Political discourse and the Stranger

Mr Howard initiated a subtle discourse on immigration as only the son of east European Jewish migrant parents could. Lenny Henry can say things about the black community which makes us all laugh but which if I said them might lead to a riot or at least to the questioning of my motives. Howard's discourse however provides a presumably unintentioned environment for the racist to emerge out of hiding with seeming sanction from the establishment. The majority of immigrants to Britain are white but it is presumed by the racist that Mr Howard is talking about people of colour. England is not stopping Australians and White South Africans so the implication is black. Howard remembers the need that drove his parents to come here – but today these strangers have to justify their need.

tioning and calling to account is important. It provides a powerful message to communities and congregations. Where such messages are not expressed a vacuum is provided for those who are racist, for whom the stranger is a figure of hate or of unconscious fear, to come out of the woodwork to express their normally socially unacceptable hate-filled ideas.

Then again where social injustices and significant poverty are not being addressed then the divide caused when the stranger is welcomed and cared for is exacerbated and allows the blame for inadequate social provision for the native poor to be placed on the stranger. Time and again when asylum seekers have been placed in places where the predominant population is poor white British the strangers become seen as in competition for the limited local resources.

It is easy for the middle classes to take the high moral ground. The situation does not immediately affect them they are not in competition for resources. Resources that in working class areas in our cities are scant and competed for. In Glasgow, for example, old institutions have been redecorated and turned into simple flats for asylum seekers using central government funds while around the same flats

be made real in the present and so also in the future that together we can construct. The remembering that takes place in the Eucharist makes the psychological arrow of time point in two directions, "remembering his holy sufferings and his resurrection from the dead and his return to heaven...and his glorious fearful coming again" (Eucharistic prayer of St. Basil). Our vision remains open-ended.

This ritual remembering with its powerful open symbols allow the secular and the sacred to intermingle with all sorts of unforeseen conclusions. And the tongue-tied find a new language of performance and action. The ways we remember, the stories we tell of ourselves as we gather around the eucharistic table are always potentially subversive and transformative events. They provoke us to see our times with new eyes and enable us to engage the world with clearer vision and renewed hope.

The background to this reflection was the emergence during the last general election of the race card as a political tool. There were some comments from some Church leaders, notably in Worcester, but nothing that could be regarded as a common stance. The issue of levels of immigration and numbers of asylum seekers and their cost to the British tax-

payer were placed centre stage. Amazingly we saw Mr. Howard, the son of former Eastern European Jewish émigrés, starting the running with his comments on numbers and provision of asylum seekers.

In this context what can the Christian community expect from its leaders and teachers? They are not party politicians, the jibe that the Anglican Church is the Conservative Party at prayer no longer holds much grip; nor are they social scientists - they may be by training but that is not their primary ecclesial and social function. They are the teachers of the Churches; theirs is essentially a moral leadership. What do they bring to this task? No doubt many and varied human skills and hopefully some graced ones. They are men and women of the Spirit, hearers of the Word. As such their first task is to remember. To remember who we are, where we come from and where and to whom we are going. The pastor is the spirit-indwelt living memory of the body of Christ.

What are we called to remember for the sake of the Church? God in Christ, the doings of God with his free people Israel, and the doings of God in Christ with his world. At the heart of this memory is strangeness. The God who

Bangladesh, in turn providing provision, social and religious for their fellow nationals.

After the Irish in Handsworth, came the Afro Caribbean, the Sikh and Punjabi, and more recently the Vietnamese. Those who first moved in struggled and then helped those who came after.

Must those who come anew among us still struggle today? And must they be dispersed to Glasgow and Worcester and Essex; making sure they cannot establish mutually supportive networks among themselves but sink or swim among strangers who seem to have little interest in them or their cultures? Without a certain critical mass of mutual support situations of strangeness are exacerbated. The stranger becomes the isolated figure of fun or hate – the scapegoat for the dark thoughts and feeling we cannot express in polite company.

As the Church of the strange God of Strangers can we make meeting places available for those who have not the means of free association so as to meet to celebrate their identity? Can we challenge local authorities where there is inadequate supervision by politely but insistently asking what provision there is for these strangers in our midst? Such public ques-

To remember and to challenge.

While the God we worship has become more familiar to us as Father, Son and Spirit – he remains Yahweh the strange God whose spirit blows where she wills. If there are communities in our communions where there is no racial diversity, no obvious stranger within, if the outsider and the powerless are not at least remembered in communal prayer and active charity, then the God we call on in such assemblies is not strange at all. It is an idol, a self-made image, of the old dispensation before Moses spoke the strange name. God is the creator of all history not of our particular national myths. The challenge is at least to enable our minority groups to support themselves or to support agencies enabling them to do so and so to continue the logic of the liberating God of exodus.

The provision for the foreigner or stranger often comes first from within the community of the strangers. Sparkbrook in Birmingham in the 1950s saw Irish immigrants, who were first met with suspicion and distrust, create homes where others could stay and get settled. Then as they settled and moved outward to the leafy suburbs, immigrants from the Asian Subcontinent followed from India, Pakistan, and

called Moses to be the leader of this strange hotch potch of migrant workers, émigrés, and war survivors revealed himself strangely in a burning bush and under question of his reluctant prophet revealed his even stranger identity. Yahweh can mean “I am who I am”, or “I will be who I will be”, or even “I will be where I will be”. In other words: “I will always be more than you can ever envision”. The mystics of Judaism and Christianity and indeed Sufi Islam have explored that strangeness ever since, at times to the edge of madness.

The theme of strangeness emerges time and again. It is the strange figure of Melchizedek, a foreigner, of a strange religion who offers bread and wine to the searching Abram and Sarah. Three strangers, the angelic messengers depicted by Rublev’s icon, promise the seeming impossible to aged Abraham and Sarah – the birth of a son and the creation of a new people. This strange new people, as evidence of their authentic strange divine origin, must create *in perpetuum* for the widow, the orphan and the stranger, the powerless ones, a privileged place in the midst of this strange God’s strange rule. And so Israel is called to be a living reminder that God’s people were once casualties of war and pawns in the free play of political struggle. And now forever

more they must create a space for just such sons and daughters of Eve.

Then our strange God comes closer still as the child of this liberated people who are yet again slaves. But who recognises the strange divine presence? Not the children within the covenant but three strangers from the East, men of colour, of strange languages and stranger religions. Revelation of the divine presence within comes with the help of the stranger from outside. The stranger always has the possibility of opening up our world if they are given the space to be themselves in our midst.

It is a stranger from without, the Syro-Phoenician woman who provokes Jesus to open his message of the Kingdom beyond the borders of a reformed Israel to an unsuspecting world. It is a Samaritan woman, an enemy of God's chosen ones, who shares the message of the waters of life with her town. They then come to believe in a Gospel that is not to be limited by Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim or indeed any holy places, churches and basilicas. The Gospel will from then on happen wherever men and women gather in spirit and truth.

The risen Jesus is a stranger to his disciples and companions – they do not immediately recognise him – he comes among them opening a perspective that was not anticipated. And which can only be entered when he, the stranger, has been accepted and welcomed.

Christian leaders are entrusted to remember, in the midst of their people, that the Strange God continues throughout the history of salvation to provoke us to see and think differently. The means of this provocation to thought and renewed understanding is often the stranger.

Migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers provoke us to see what it is we have and so many desire. A free land, where life and love and worship can be pursued by liberated men and women. But they bring us riches of culture and new perspectives that challenge us and provide work without which our freedom cannot continue. What would the National Health Service be without Irish and Afro-Caribbean men and women? How tedious our cuisine without Italian, Greek, Indian, Thai, Sushi, Moroccan, Spanish, restaurants! How dull without the Balti houses of the Midlands! Our changed tastes are a simple sign of diversity celebrated and appreciated.