NO SAFE SPACE

Words fall in and out of fashion. It's hard to remember, but thirty years ago, few people talked about community because the emphasis was so much on the individual. It was an era of political reform which needed the free movement of labour to ensure new opportunities were grasped. Social mobility led to the loosening of local neighbourhoods, especially where there was less work to keep people afloat. But this came at a cost. Today, there is so much talk of community, it feels the word is devalued. Anyone peeking at us from the 1980s would assume that we had re-discovered community in the UK, so often do we use the word.

But something is not quite right.

The more we speak about community, the shriller and more hostile our conversation becomes. All sorts of divisions are coming to the surface which make the UK a less comfortable place to live in. We are not alone in this. It is a global trend. There are some UK-specific dimensions which cause concern, but the fractures are worse in many other countries that could be named, both east and west of this island.

Why do we feel more separate even as we become more connected? Four factors spring to mind.

1. The turbulence caused by the banking crisis in the first decade of this century is far from quelled. Economies are not healthy and when they do not grow markedly, it is not possible for everyone to see their standard of living improve. In many cases, they have dropped. In the same period, however, executive pay has entered the stratosphere. And very few believed to be responsible for the banking crisis have been made to pay for it. On the contrary, people are sure they are being paid more. Appearance is all. The wake of an economic crash usually produces populist movements. These sometimes morph into extremist politics and in places we might not expect, like Sweden. The co-incidence of a surge in immigration from Afghanistan, the Middle East and north Africa has raised tensions within and between nations and laid bare different values in people.

2. There has been an almost complete collapse of trust in institutions which has been identified by pollsters and commentators, most recently by the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, who sees it as one of the most significant components of our malaise. The covering up of child abuse and hospital deaths; miscarriages of justice, expenses scandals, phone tapping, misuse of information and a rapacious bonus culture have each contributed to a loss of belief in the very things that make up who we are together. People now make knee-jerk assumptions about Parliament, the banks, the media, the police and, let's be clear: the Church. There is some substance to these beliefs, but cynicism is infectious and there are signs of corrosion. Britain has created many big institutions which have shaped its people. When we attack

them for the sake of it, we come close to an act of self-harm. These institutions belong to us.

3. Since 2014, the United Kingdom has been party to two referendums. Unlike the Swiss, we are not accustomed to using this democratic tool. Judgments have been formed on Scottish independence and the UK's withdrawal from the EU. In both cases, decisions were reached where the split between two camps on a binary outcome was very close. In each case, only one side could win, and the winner took it all. Families and friends were used to burying their political differences; we didn't talk about them – it was the British way. All this has changed, in part because of these two referendums. You may be comfortable with that; you may not. But the tone of debate has become shriller and opened up divisions that are not easily healed.

4. Even bigger than the three previous factors is the way the internet is being shaped and used. We use social media without looking people in the eyes and it encourages disinhibition similar to driving a car, where even mild-mannered people can turn into the Incredible Hulk if someone cuts them up. The advertising structures online privilege anger, outrage and taking offence, for these emotions attract the most attention and eyeballs get advertising revenue for the platform. Before social media, people would sound off in the privacy of their own home and all but the household would be preserved from their bile. Now, armed with a smartphone and a cup of coffee, many people delight in their power to reach the world with their misanthropy. And we are never sure who lies behind stuff. Who knew about troll farms even ten years ago? It would have sounded straight out of a Pixar animated movie. These early years of the internet may be looked back on by future generations like the wild west before law and order was introduced. We must hope so, or it will worsen.

An illuminating finding from the US has shown that as people have become more accepting of racial and cultural differences, they have become more intolerant politically. The percentage of Americans saying they would be happy for their child to marry someone of another ethnicity is going up while those who would be happy for their child to marry someone from another political party is going down. US trends often spread across the Atlantic. We may be at the start of an era where we tolerate people's values and beliefs less because these are the last acceptable refuge of prejudice.

Cass Sunstein, the author of Nudge theory, speaks of 'the law of group polarisation' where people act a certain way because they think others do. Online, we have the freedom to de-friend people on social media. It's much easier to do than blowing off a friend socially until they get the message you don't like them anymore. All we

have to do is lightly press the touch screen. This is how we create online bubbles. It irritates us to see someone sounding off on social media when we don't agree with them. How dare they use my feed to make a point I disapprove of? Bit by bit, we surround ourselves with like-minded people who shore up our view of the world and never challenge it.

I think Christians must strive hard to resist this. If we cut ourselves off from people who think differently to us, we limit our capacity to bless others with the good news to those we agree with. No need to love our enemies; we can simply defriend them. Before long we are living in an echo chamber and no-one is testing us or challenging us over what we believe. This results in a weak apologetic. Very few people are expected to slug it out intellectually with people like Richard Dawkins and David Aaronovitch, but each of us should have something to say to those who challenge us over what we believe; who call on us to give a reason for the hope that is in us. If we only surround ourselves with those who recite the Nicene Creed, the chances are we won't be ready.

The early Christians had few privileges. After sharing the news of Jesus and his resurrection, they would be routinely kicked out of the synagogue. On using the streets, they would be picked up by the Romans and, if lucky, be booted out of town. A key boundary in today's culture is the need not to create offence. This is partly caused by the way in which offence is taken more easily. It is gratuitous and unkind to set out to offend someone. But we can't get away from the truth that the cross of Christ has, since the apostle Paul first named it, caused offence to many who hear of it.

How we engage with our communities is more relevant than ever, partly because the culture is less obviously Christian than it once was, and partly because the culture is evolving at a dizzying speed which few in this world have a handle on. When the stakes are higher, people tend to become risk-averse. My plea to this community of lay ministers is to plunge in. The Holy Spirit is already there, waiting for you. You won't like everyone you meet or everything they say, and that feeling may be mutual. But to retreat to our safe spaces at this juncture in the UK's history does little either for our country or our God.

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October 20, 2018