

## The Spirit the Crosses Borders

Ramsden Sermon given before the University of Cambridge, Pentecost 2022

So what am I doing here?

This is perhaps a question we are all asking ourselves on this Jubilee weekend when we could be on the river, or on a city break, or still in bed.... What am I doing here?

As I ask myself the question there are various levels at which I seem to need an answer for myself:

There is the question of place:

What is a Methodist doing in a Cambridge – a place to which John Wesley was refused admittance by the Puritans of his day – and which he subsequently avoided like the plague?

And then there is the question of the occasion:

What is a non-conformist doing preaching in the established church as we celebrate the Queen's Jubilee?

Or what is a white person doing preaching the Ramsden sermon that celebrates the extension of the Christian faith into the Commonwealth – a white person who has worked hard as part of the preaching syndicate to see that voices from other parts of the world speak on their own behalf?

And then there is the question of the text:

What is a woman doing speaking on a text that has taken the witness of the women at the empty tomb of Easter Day and platformed a man to speak solely to men?

Or what is a member of the Cambridge Theological Federation, committed to interfaith dialogue, doing speaking on a text that has been used to redefine Israel not only to include the Gentiles but to supersede Judaism?

Or what is a member of a Wesley House that seeks to decolonize theology doing preaching on a text that has been used to legitimise the colonising of peoples across the world by conquistadores of every first world nation hungry for gold, and missionaries of every denomination, hungry for souls?

What am I doing here?

I am here both because I belong... and because I don't.

Because, by both circumstance, and by choice, I *choose* to inhabit borderlands which are the domain of the spirit and the promise of a better world.

Your intended preacher for today was Bishop Minerva Carcaño, a Mexican American woman from the borderlands of the Valley – that ravaged and disputed land between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande – territory that was once Indian, then Mexican, then

Texan, now part of the United States. Bishop Carcaño is someone who embodies far more visibly than I can ever do, a way of life that crosses borders every day – of language; of culture; of gender barriers. A Mexican-American bishop in a white majority church in a white man's land in which Hispanic children, like black children are of less consequence than the lobbies that pay to keep guns in the hands of white supremacists and the political forces that keep critical race theory out of the classroom.

I hope that one day she will stand here and bring you a sermon that begins from somewhere else, but, today, as a child of this nation, and as a graduate member of this university, and as an heir of the western intellectual paradigm, I must start from here.

But, 'here' is not a simple place because the journeys which as Principal of Wesley House I have been obliged to make these last ten years since Wesley House was refounded and refocused upon research and education in the global Wesleyan family, these journeys have invited me to cross borders, not only in the literal sense as I have visited the United States and Mexico, Zimbabwe and South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania, South Korea and Japan, but in the internal sense as I have developed relationships and been invited to see the world from other points of view. Journeys which have complexified my sense of where I belong and enriched it to the extent that 'home' is no longer a simple proposition, if it ever was.

On these travels, I have been to the Valley. To that desert of mesquite trees where the wind blows and the dust swirls and the herons and the ibis and the egrets fly. I have been to Borderland Park where the wire mesh that separates Tijuana from San Diego is so fine that not even fingers can touch even as the pelicans fly nonchalantly over the fence that extends even into the sea. I have crossed the Rio Grande on foot at Nuevo Progreso and made the journey back again – a gringo in a queue of mestizas of Mexican/Indian descent – people who were born here - who stand and stand in line in the sweltering heat. And I have been convicted of the privilege of my birth and my passport and my education on this border where, as Gloria Anzaldúa puts it, the first world rubs against the third world to make an 'open wound' that never heals.

Yet, this, like other borders around the world, has become a border that I enter by choice and do not simply cross – a place in which I cannot abrogate the richness of the intellectual life to which I am heir, nor the democratic institutions that grant the human rights and huge freedoms from I benefit– but in which borderland I cannot ignore the self deceptions and violence on which the edifice of the West has been built and is maintained and which is seen all too clearly by those whose land or self determination was stolen or treated away, who remain without rights or voice on the other side of the fences we build, wherever borders are drawn between those we will treat as people, and those we will process.

Christianity, of course, has played its part in bolstering the hegemony of the West, of the white, of the patriarchal, of the hetero-normative and of the lie that truth is one – something I learned from Janet Soskice, when studying the Triplos in the Divinity Faculty here was that, 'the truth looks different from here' – a foundation that has led me to think that any insistence on a single totalising narrative is nothing short of fascism – whatever clothes it might wear.

And we can read this text, set for Pentecost, in that light. Pentecost, the name of a Jewish festival which Christians have appropriated, for our hegemonizing narrative. For here the many voices of Babel are defeated by the unifying language of the Spirit. Here starts the Church, built on Peter the Rock, legitimating his claim in Jerusalem, the centre of the religious landscape, now heard, representatively by all the known world (well, its men, anyway); and it is one short leap to Christendom and one short leap to the scramble for Africa and another to the neo-conservative political ideologies that cloaked in evangelical Christianity seek to suppress all voices and histories but their own.

And if this is so, then why am I here? professing Christian faith? Preaching this text, on this day?

I am here because even in this text there are other voices and stories if we would listen to them, or let different others help us find them, of oneness that is not built on homogeneity or maintained by cultural purity, or defended by fences and other more persuasive security measures.

Because here in this text is communication that does not require everyone to speak English or assume that the gospel should be extended from here; here are cultural identities that need not be surrendered to a dominant culture – even a Christian one; and here is a way of living that is not founded on a man called Rock, but which relies on a Spirit that crosses borders as easily as a pelican can lift itself above the sea.

Of course the rationalists and gatekeepers of the day dismissed this heart to heart communication in which the humanity of the other is recognised and the borders between nations and identities are softened and a sense of belonging and solidarity is created with all things seen and unseen, of course the rationalists dismissed the experience as drunkenness. What else could it be? How could this be of God? How dangerous to the carefully constructed order of things would it be for this Spirit to be poured out on all flesh? How many self deceptions and vested interests would fall?

Just as the rationalists of John Wesley's day dismissed him as an enthusiast and banned him from preaching the University sermon in Oxford; just as the women were dismissed on that first Easter day with their visions of angels and stories of an empty tomb; just as the spiritualities of indigenous peoples everywhere are discounted by western experts who export their sterile solutions to everything from peace making to farming, when the truth looks different from here... when not merely crossing borders of language and culture and paradigms of thought but entering into those borderlands might be the generative place in which this spirit is at work, weaving together the fibres of a better world.

So postcolonial theory tasks the privileged to allow room for other voices; and supports the subjugated to find their voice. And yet as the Chicana scholar, Gloria Anzaldúa, insists, to find a counter-stance is not enough because a counter-stance is not a way of life. It is not enough to stand on one bank throwing stones against the other, even from the place of subjugation; it is not enough even to switch sides from one bank to another in solidarity with those who protest - not enough to stand against the West, even as a westerner, or against Christianity, even as a Christian, or against patriarchy or against hetero-normativity.

Rather, Gloria Anzaldúa invites us all into the Borderlands of her Valley home, in which new, rich, enriching and life giving, intersectional identities can be wrought that are not blind to the flaws and oppressions of our home cultures – whether Western or indigenous to other cultures, but are open to the life force that comes like wind and like fire, energising and changing the shape of the world we inhabit through encounter.

It is Easter Day 2022. 7 weeks ago. I am the guest of the Methodist Church in Kenya. Planted by the British in 1862 it has been an independent church since 1967. As I prepare to preach – almost the only white person in a congregation of more than 500, I am aware of the cultural violence perpetrated by my Methodist ancestors in Kenya – the demonization of everything African; the separating of young men and women from the culture around them by refusing to allow them to complete the rites of initiation necessary to adult status in their community; the cutting off from sources of wisdom and identity of generations of people from traditions now half lost; the carving up of denominational missions on tribal lines that still reinforce and struggle to challenge electoral violence – and much more. I have made it my business to read this history and hear these voices and learn from them.

And yet important though these voices are for me to hear, there are other narratives that also need a place... the voice of one Kenyan Wesley House research student, for example, as we stood outside the old divinity school where I was taught, and where I was explaining about the expiring of the 500 year lease from St Johns on that property, to which she said, 'You have been teaching theology in this university for more than 500 years? What took you so long to get to Kenya?'

As I prepared to preach the Easter message 7 weeks ago, I knew that whilst cultural humility was essential, this would not be the place for a colonial guilt that would silence me and keep me on one bank or another, because by being invited to preach and into the homes of my Kenyan hosts and into the classroom to teach at the university, I was being invited not to cross a border but to enter the borderland of encounter; I was being invited into a space in which my sense of belonging and identity and home would be changed if I would let it.

Not that all the best of what I have inherited would no longer belong to me... but that I would learn how to share it, as a gift that others could examine and critique, and that I would learn how to receive the best of what others have in their hands... that in the exchange something new might be birthed... dreams and visions of a new heaven and new earth, animated by the Spirit that visited those gathered at Pentecost, who found that they could understand one another.

The experience on that day of Pentecost was the work of a moment. An instant. An ecstatic experience of oneness and communion. And yet the life of the Spirit is not a silver bullet or a magic wand that solves the deep gulfs of understanding and unequal wealth and traumatised histories of our world, it is a way of life that needs to be lived everyday.

In the classrooms of Kenya Methodist University I did not want to be the feted white guest and yet I was in a culture that gives honour to those to teach and lead. The students would not let me wait in line for my food no matter how hard I tried... they wanted me to go first and they wanted to serve me. Nothing else felt right to them and nothing felt more wrong to me. I wanted a classroom that was a collaborative learning space where students would challenge and ask questions and take the learning where they needed it to go but whatever I tried the students were slow to question out of habit and out of respect.

What to do that we might understand one another? I named the gaps. I named my goals. We named the gaps. We named our goals. We laughed. We learned. And there were moments like wind and like fire as something in each and between each burst into life and the miracle of communication happened.

And this is why I am here. Because I believe in the non-coercive Spirit of God – which others might name in a myriad other ways – who invites us all not simply to cross borders, but to enter the borderlands of encounter where I believe the goodness of God is at work – in the borderland wherever Mexico and the USA meet; in the borderland wherever colonized and colonizer meet; in the borderland where people of faith and none meet; in the borderland where the proper colleges of a university and its satellite colleges meet; in the borderland where one human heart may meet another and be changed as we have the courage and the humility to let go, not of the Babel of home cultural identities and languages, but of the Babel tower's builders' need to be first, to be best, to be the only, and to be right.

In the borderland where are invited to acknowledge what those pushed to the margins know, that our identities are not a homogenous, God-given, unassailable birthright – British, Christian, white as if these were synonyms, but

are complex, intersectional, dynamic and porous crucibles – of culture and of belief, of gender and of sexuality, of ethnicity and of nationality. An invitation into the Pentecostal borderland where the Spirit of God teaches listening and self awareness, fragility and resilience, self esteem and interdependence.

So, as a child of this nation on this Jubilee weekend, with all its overtones of Empire I want to acknowledge damage done and the huge inequalities that separate us still, and yet I also want to uphold the values to which the new commonwealth is committed of which the next head will not be the British monarch by right, but whomever the member states elect. As a graduate member of this university, with all its brilliance and intellectual history, I want to lay down the superiorities of the canons of knowledge that come only from the western paradigm and open our curricula and our academic appointments to those who see differently because they begin from somewhere else, and yet I know that such openness will be threatening to those whose work and worldview will inevitably be de-centred and that this work will take patience and a long obedience in the same direction. And as a White Western Christian and as a woman I want to critique so much of the way in which we have wielded the bible as a tribal weapon and yet, I want to be

in that crowd at Pentecost, feeling that wind and fire that disturbs and purifies and unifies and sets us together on a journey – not from any perceived centre to any perceived periphery; but as the spirit is poured out on all flesh - from everywhere to everywhere, which puts the invitation into the borderland which is the domain of the Spirit and the promise of a better world into the hands of us all.