

**United Reformed Church  
Racial Justice and Multi Cultural Ministry**

**FEAST!  
CELEBRATING OUR LIFE TOGETHER**

Carrs Lane Church  
Birmingham

Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> September 2011  
2.40pm

**Keynote Address II**

Come with me if you will to South Africa. On many occasions in Johannesburg and Soweto I was part of multi cultural worship. A rich palette of humanity would be united in prayer and praise.

Time and again we'd begin with *To God be the glory*, inherited from the West and sung at a rather decorous British speed. Then we'd launch into a song in the vernacular: hip-swinging, hymn-book-bashing and ululating, or heart-stoppingly grief-stricken with soulful airs and mournful eyes.

The music would be at one and the same time different and shared, European melodies over African harmonies, Zulu rhythm with Victorian sentiment.

And if that happened as indigenous and missionary music melded, how much more diverse our worship is now in a

globalised world of unlimited IT, easy travel and inter-continental migration.

We're experiencing it today throughout this **Feast!** as one set after another reflects theology and art that draw upon a wide range of influences, and fashion a new kaleidoscopic culture for the twenty first century.

Of course, this globalised world is full of difference and variety in far more things than worship.

I think of the forty two **restaurants** that at one time I counted on a single road in South Croydon where we used to live - a culinary United Nations was to be tasted there.

I think of how **clothing** styles borrow across national barriers, so that African women wear Italian shoes and British men choose Nehru collars. And I wear this cotton garment proudly - not as some sort of patronising fancy dress but to honour the friends in India who gave it to me and who enriched by humanity by embracing me with love and enlarged my faith by introducing to me again to Jesus as he is understood by Dalit people.

And most of all, whatever we may need to say about the rioting in August, so many of our **communities** are defined not by being uptight racial ghettos but by the vibrantly peaceful coexistence of people who own a variety of background yet a common citizenship.

Now, this inter-cultural harmony doesn't just happen. It has to be a deliberate goal and pursuing it must be determined. It is not the result of some liberal, postmodern mindset that

naively speaks of equality, as if it was the automatic consequence of being ever so cool-ly contemporary and ever-so slightly left wing. Nor is equality about pretending we're all the same.

Indeed, in his 1996 work, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf says that 'Stress on equality makes sense only by attending to differences.'<sup>1</sup>

And in his new book, *A Public Faith*, he goes even further, wanting to hold in tension both what separates and what unites us. He writes, 'Only when we see and respect both undeniable differences that give communities a peculiar character **and** commonalities that bind them together will we be able to honour and promote the viable co-existence of all.'<sup>2</sup>

You see, equality - equal dignity and opportunity, equal rights and status - equality is about me letting you be you and you letting me be me because we see each other as made in the image of God. When he was Dean of Johannesburg in the 1960s, Gonville French-Beytagh found himself for the first time encountering the full implications of the *apartheid* system - not only how the policy was a sin and the doctrine a heresy, but also how it led to some people utterly dehumanising others who weren't like them.

He concluded that the journey towards a South African society that was truly inter-cultural was not advanced by black people becoming like white people but as we all 'enter [together]

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<sup>1</sup> Volf, Miroslav 1996 *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation* Nashville: Abingdon page 18

<sup>2</sup> Volf, Miroslav 2011 *A Public Faith: how followers of Christ should serve the common good* Grand Rapids: Brazos Press page 140

*into the common heritage of the whole of humankind.'*<sup>3</sup>

In the same way, globalisation is only acceptable when it is not a euphemism for 'western dominance',<sup>4</sup> which assumes only one culture is adequate.

Quite the opposite; inter cultural maturity and stability emerges from humility. Not the humility that is characterised as weakness, passivity or apathy, but the humility that wants to celebrate our life together in a feast of learning from each other, embracing what is different in each other, 'going', in Michael Jagessar's words, 'beyond one's cultural comfort zone.'<sup>5</sup>

One of the many ways in which this humility is possible is as we embrace one another's music, and not least hymns and songs, just as we are in today's **Feast!** In 1984, two Free Church ministers, who became well known hymn writers, were talking. Fred Pratt Green asked Fred Kaan if there was a future for hymnody?

Dr Kaan said

*'yes, but it may be going in a direction which is different from the one we expect, and that is the direction on which we begin to learn musical and poetic idioms from cultures other than our own.'*

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<sup>3</sup> ffrench-Beytagh, Gonville 1973 *Encountering Darkness* London: Collins page 251

<sup>4</sup> Bauckham, Richard 2010 *The Bible in Politics: how to read the Bible politically* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn London: SPCK page xii

<sup>5</sup> Jagessar, Michael N. Address to Eastern Synod of the United Reformed Church 19<sup>th</sup> March 2011

*This, Kaan continued, is where I think we in the west ought to listen far more carefully to our brothers and sisters in the [rest of the] world .... We should learn to share their experience, which is bound to include oppression, poverty and so on. We need to see life, the longing for human dignity, as expressed by those for whom this is a real struggle.*

And he concluded: ... we will learn to sing hymns in idioms which hitherto have been strange to us.<sup>6</sup>

Singing each others' hymns and songs is a wonderful gateway to this humility that's at the heart of being inter-cultural.

They will draw us closer to each other in the togetherness that sharing music uniquely enables, as they help us to bear one another's burdens, harmonically weeping and rhythmically rejoicing with our neighbours.

Moreover, singing the songs of one another's cultures will also help us to emulate God's bias to the hapless and hopeless, who so often will be strangers.

'We shall overcome', 'Nkosi sikeleli Afrika', 'Let my people go' are the songs of those longing for liberation.

As that music becomes music we hold in common so we grow in understanding of how we belong to one another, with campaigns to wage together and new births to celebrate together.

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<sup>6</sup> Leaver, Robin A and James H. Litton eds 1985 *Duty and Delight: Routley Remembered A Memorial Tribute to Erik Routley 1917-82* Norwich: Hope/Canterbury page 228

Let me put it this way: this morning we sang about 'good news *for* the poor, good news *from* the Lord'.<sup>7</sup> But it seems to me it's also true to emphasise good news *from* the poor - because as we all embrace that and let it shape our commonwealth I dare to believe that, in our unity, we will become good news *for* the Lord.

Tomorrow's epistle reading is from Paul's letter to the Philippians.<sup>8</sup>

It includes one of the earliest of all Christian hymns. It is a paean of praise to Jesus, who in humility emptied himself - living and dying that we might know love and being raised that we might live.

Ultimately, of course, it is singing *that* hymn, and having the same mind that is in that Christ, by which we will be able to love even as we are loved - and that is the path to true unity where all shall be included in 'the feast of life.'

So be it and to God alone be the glory.

Rev'd Nigel Uden

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<sup>7</sup> Garth Hewitt 1998 - from the title track of *The Feast of Life - a Musical of Hope*

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 2.1-12