

Who Is My Neighbour?

A Panorama programme which this week highlighted the problem of anti-semitism in the Labour Party has led to a deepening of the divisions within its ranks over this thorny issue with accusations and counter accusations flying backwards and forwards. Believe me, I don't wish to express any political bias here but I find it incredible that any political party can appear to be so constitutionally unable to condemn unequivocally this odious brand of racism within its ranks. Rather than address the issue Labour grandees are just attacking each other for attacking each other neatly sidelining the issue itself. This failure to own the problem, it seems to me, amounts to institutional denial on a shameful scale.

In the interests of political balance, I should also point out that the Conservative party has a very real problem of Islamophobia which also goes unaddressed and is quietly and gratefully swept under the carpet while the focus is on Labour's difficulties. In the Tory ranks this form of racism is not just limited to the xenophobic extreme right but extends, as with Labour, into the highest echelons of the party, even tainting one of the current leadership candidates.

I had hoped that in this country we had moved on from the kind of openly expressed racial prejudice parodied in the sit-com *'Till Death Us Do Part'* in the 1960s and 70s when it was quite acceptable to laugh at the blatant racism of Alf Garnett. But when our two major political parties seem so complacent and unwilling to act on this evil among their own members it is small wonder that both anti-semitism and islamophobia are on the rise in the country today; and this goes for other forms of racism too. I would be surprised if there isn't a person of African, Asian or Eastern European heritage, man, woman or child, in this congregation who hasn't experienced some form of racism in the street, the pub, the workplace or at school in this country, and this is quite simply unacceptable.

In the Gospel today Jesus gives us all the teaching we need to see how totally incompatible it is with our Christian calling to harbour racist attitudes towards anyone, even someone who is an enemy of my people and nation. In typical fashion, though, Jesus doesn't so much condemn the wrongdoers

in the story of the Good Samaritan as praise and commend the one who acts out of charity towards a fellow human being in trouble who regards him as an enemy. In this way Jesus shows up the inhumanity of the priest and the levite who shelter behind religious rules to excuse their racial bias and avoid their duty to a fellow human being in need.

The Law features in the readings today with Moses telling the people that God's Law is not something complicated or beyond their strength and Jesus endorses this when he points out that the Law is actually very simple. It comes down to just one thing: Love. If we love God and our neighbour we fulfil all God ever wants of us for, as St John writes, 'God is love and whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them'. Let us ask daily and constantly for the grace from God to love as he wants us to love, with the love of the Good Samaritan who stopped to help his enemy, and with the love of Jesus who gave his life for friend and foe alike.