

MULTICULTURAL BONES: THE TESTIMONY OF THE ROMAN CATACOMBS

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The world of archaeology has been hugely enriched in recent years by the availability of the science surrounding DNA. Bones in the ground can now reveal much more about the origins of the people whose lives they once represented. The Vatican has permitted research into the origins of the many corpses from the 1st to the 4th century, buried in the catacombs in Rome. This research demonstrates conclusively that the saints from these centuries came from many parts of the ancient world – a veritable multi-cultural community of bones!

Other recent research conducted on a smaller scale on skeletons from the time of Roman London reveals a similar pattern. London seems to have been composed of a majority of citizens from lands other than Britain. In one sense this is not too surprising. Empires draw from the inhabitants of the lands that are conquered, as soldiers, slaves, business people, traders and administrators. Indeed Empire makes travel both desirable and possible. This is the way to get on in the world. Capital cities act as magnets to attract those who are trying to improve their lot in life.

The Christian community in Rome rightly reflected the diversity of the wider society in which it was located. This research acts as a timely reminder that a multi-cultural experience of the faith was located at the very origins of Christianity in terms of both time and place. Rome's status as an early centre of the faith meant that it reflected early Christian life and experience more broadly. The faith at that time was primarily located in cities more than in rural areas and cities were usually diverse in terms of their population mix.

We don't know exactly what kinds of tensions and differing perspectives existed because of the diversity of racial, linguistic and cultural experiences. However we can gain a glimpse of some of the class tensions that were

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present in the Corinthian church, especially in relation to Chloe's people. But even though we cannot be part of their conversations and congregational life it is good to be reminded that a multi-cultural reality was present in the origins of the church.

What might we learn from this reminder? In our present time, migration is occurring around the world on a huge scale. Some of that migration brings people from the continents of Asian, Africa and South America to the West in a whole variety of guises. Some are refugees, others economic migrants, still others are sought for their skills and finance, while a good many arrive self consciously as missionaries.

Overall, the church in the West is now composed of people from almost every nation on earth. It is an astonishing mosaic! However, if in a thousand year's time someone were to excavate the bones of our present church members they might be surprised to discover that these bones did not exist in multicultural communion. Although there are some notable exceptions, for the most part our local churches do not reflect the overall diversity of the church so much as the divided nature of our society.

This reality leaves us with at least three key challenges.

1. Benefitting from the wealth of our diverse Christian experiences. The Christian community contains the seeds of a creative conversation that might illuminate our understanding of God, the church, the mission of God and our relationship with the world in which we live. The question is how we might unlock those seeds and help them to grow and flourish. Christian leaders can and must take the initiative in building relationships of trust from which creativity can flow. Those who have tried this route will know that it is not easy and that our first efforts might be rebuffed, misunderstood and even abused. That is not a reason to stop trying! This is a new language that we are called to learn and as with all language learning the first steps will almost certainly mean the making of mistakes, embarrassment and miscommunication.
2. Addressing the needs of our children and grandchildren. Our children are nearly all living in the midst of a new set of encounters with people of other races and cultures. Out of this is being shaped a set of values, norms and familiarities that it is difficult for those of us who are new to this world to grapple with or understand. This reality represents another kind of cultural language, one that we might learn as a second language but which we do not currently comprehend. What we attempt as the speakers of a second language, our children might do much better as native speakers of the new language of a multi-cultural reality.
3. Constructing a prophetic community that can help shape the future of the western societies and communities in which we find ourselves located. Division, suspicion, isolation and fear are some of the features of our bitterly divided cities and towns where whole cultures rarely meet

or communicate significantly with others outside of their own culture or sub-culture. Speaking negatively, this is a recipe for conflict, but perhaps even more tragically it misses the amazing gift that cultural diversity accompanied by the divine gift of love can bring to a whole society.

The Christian community has an opportunity to model what this might look like. Islam offers a mono-cultural model for bringing different racial groups together – in essence all are called to adopt an essentially Arab culture. The Christian church does not have a single dominating culture and theological speaking should not have. All cultural expressions of the gospel are legitimate provided they do not undermine the gospel itself. That represents a wonderful contribution to the question as to how we might live together in this new world of many identities.