

### *The widening circle of 'us'*



Naomi Alderman is successful novelist and games writer. (Some computer games have story lines that involve sending people on complex missions; she writes those stories.) She was also the first Writer in Residence at Gladstone's Library, and whilst there wrote a short piece in which she stated, *"When Gladstone was born, his father made money from the slave-trade, and the circle of "real human beings" extended no further than adult Christian white men with property. Slowly we've moved that circle outward, expanding it liberally. Not just men with property, but all men. Not just white men but black men. Not just men but women. Not just Christians but also all faiths and none."* Alderman is talking about inclusion, about who counts as belonging in the circle of 'us'.

The photograph above was taken in November 2018 at a meeting of Merseyside faith leaders, hosted by the Bishop of Liverpool. There are concerns in the region that affect everyone: the rise of racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia; the conditions for people in prison; the increase in homelessness; medical care for traumatised asylum seekers – many of whom need spiritual support as much as anything. However, the purpose of meeting is not to discuss topics but to make relationships. This is important because in this country, the US and parts of Europe we have seen the start of a contraction of the circle of 'us'.

Reflecting on this I recall that I grew up in a family and culture that embraced the prospect of the ever-widening circle. In the east end of London, where I lived as a child, our streets, schools and lives included: Jews, who had arrived in Gladstone's time and again in the 1930's and 40's; Afro-Caribbeans, who arrived in the 60's; and Moslem's, who arrived in the 70's. My parent's view was that people came because they were desperate and they should be welcomed and enabled to contribute. My view as a teenager was that 'foreign' teenagers were different from me and that made them *very interesting*. God's world was an amazing place full of exotic, fascinating places with exotic, fascinating people who lived in them. Some of those people ended up in London because of force of circumstance. People came to Britain because we were decent, tolerant, and compassionate. Welcoming the stranger enriched our culture and was a blessing.

Whilst recognising my teenage naivety, I still stand with Gladstone on this. He wanted the British to consider the sanctity of every human life at home and abroad *'as inviolable in the eyes of almighty*

*God' as our own. There were no exceptions of race, class or national boundaries: 'All human beings have the same claims upon our support.'*\*

The coming year will be filled with challenges, both nationally and in the life of the Church, and some of them will be potentially very divisive. Our task, as followers of Jesus, is to hold before everyone the notion that all humanity is made in God's image, that learning to live with our differences is part of our calling, and that there is only 'us'.

A very blessed and hopeful New Year to us all.

*Sheryl*

\* William Gladstone, from a foreign-policy speech in 1879 (the Midlothian campaign").