

In part, naming this Sunday after the Huguenots is a little piece of history: that three hundred years ago Wandsworth welcomed a large number of refugees from foreign oppression. The Huguenots, French Protestants, had their own chapel in Wandsworth until in due course they were assimilated into the general population; and today the only real memorial of their presence is the so-called Huguenot graveyard at the top of East Hill.

So much for history. But also can we learn from history? Louis XIV, the king of France in 1685, had been persuaded that the presence in his kingdom of a large number of Protestants represented a threat to his rule. No matter that his grandfather had converted from Protestantism to Catholicism when he became king of France, and that the country had enjoyed religious toleration for nearly a century. Indeed the Edict of Nantes which guaranteed toleration had brought to an end years of civil war. Louis staked his idea of peace not on tolerance but on uniformity. The Huguenot Protestants were ordered to conform, and many chose exile instead. Socially and economically the exiles punched far above their weight in numbers and their contribution to English, Dutch and German society has been celebrated down the centuries. For France it was a terrible self-inflicted wound.

Tolerance or uniformity? France back in the 1600s had those two options. And it has felt to me as if the question has returned again to our society. The Church of England and the Anglican Communion are torn by divisions over homosexuality. At the political level we have the most extraordinary name-calling, where people label their opponents as *enemies* or *saboteurs*, almost as if we were back in the Soviet Union of Lenin and Stalin. But I was equally shocked last week when someone I was chatting to out in the churchyard asked: 'Is it time we abandoned the experiment of allowing Muslims here?' What a bizarre label: that Muslims who have been part of our society for decades, even a century or more, who have been born and bred here, should be regarded as an 'experiment'! I disagreed clearly with the person I was speaking to and did not ask them what they really meant. But in the light of Huguenot Sunday one can imagine a courtier whispering to Louis XIV: is it time to draw a line under the Huguenot *experiment*? Ninety years of politics, that is three generations of people's lives, dismissed as disposable.

What underlies this approach seems to be both a sense of dreamy nostalgia and a search for a false uniformity. Louis XIV told himself that France would be easier to govern if everyone was like himself, a Roman Catholic. We as a society have been badly rattled by the divisions revealed by the Brexit vote and we badly want to think that good sensible people must think like we do. On the religious front we take our position on homosexuality from very deeply held principles and find it hard to imagine others disagreeing with our convictions and values. But uniformity is only ever achieved by exclusion, and exclusion is disastrous for a society and hostile to our faith. Imagine Jesus trying to impose uniformity on Simon the Zealot – a revolutionary– and Matthew the collaborationist tax collector! Somehow as complete opposites they were both among his twelve apostles. And the New Testament includes letters from both St Paul and his opposites and critics, James and Peter. And how on earth did we end up with four different gospels, each claiming a different sort of Jesus? How tempting it must have been for the first collectors and editors of the New Testament to cut out contradictions, to exclude uncomfortable versions. Why not just have one gospel instead of the four? Life would be so much simpler! We could have everyone signed up, on message, toeing the line.

No. Tolerance of a variety of belief and practice is both true to the example of Christ himself and a sign of confidence and strength in any society. It is within the DNA of Christianity from the very beginning when Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles gathered together, when Paul could speak of the divisions between slave and free, male and female, Greek and barbarian being transcended in the life of the risen Christ. It is what we have to proclaim and live: not uniformity, not even agreement. In John's gospel Jesus prays that his people may be one – but the means and evidence of that unity is not uniformity or agreement but love. (John 13.35) So let us show our unity, not by uniformity, by being the same, but by rejoicing in our differences and diversity, and by our love for one another. Amen.