

10th May 2023

Alienation

“For me, heaven would be a lack of alienation.”

Alice Sebold, *PW [Publishers Weekly] Talks with Alice Sebold* (2002)

One of the “code words” used in cryptic crosswords is “alien”. It usually crops up when the solution is in anagram form. Then, “alien” is invariably the code for “ET”. This is a direct reference, of course, to that wonderful movie by Steven Spielberg from 1982 when an alien, ET, gets stranded on earth and is adopted by some kids. It’s a feel-good movie, beloved by a generation of wide-eyed children – and adults. So, ET=alien, and you’re expected to know that if you’re a *Guardian* crossword buff.

The word “alien” cropped up in a church context recently. The question posed was: “Might people feel like an alien if they dropped in, unexpectedly, to a regular Sunday service in our church?” No, surely not! For, after all, we are a place of welcome, inclusiveness and openness. We’re not prissy, buttoned-up, or straightlaced. We work hard at making people feel at home, getting to know them, keeping them right. Alienated? Surely not ... Not in *our* church, that’s for sure.

But what about the language of our hymns, the references that everyone seems to understand which don’t make sense to a stranger? What’s this standing to sing in public? What about the offering – is this a ticket price, how much do I give, why do some people have little envelopes and I don’t? Uncomfortable bench-type seats; listening to one person speak for fifteen minutes; no applause? What’s the table at the front; why is the minister in a box; what does IHS mean in the coloured window? What’s a prayer; why are people mumbling together and a visitor doesn’t know what to say? Why are there candles? Why do some of the men who are singing at the front wear what look like dresses? What’s that smell?

If Alice Sebold feels that “heaven would be a lack of alienation”, might a stranger in our church feel alienated? If “alien” is a code in a cryptic crossword, might people feel like ET in an alien world when they don’t have the codes to understand what on earth is going on in our church?

ET in the movie was desperate to go home. Might those who feel alienated in our congregations choose to go home and not come back, because their feelings of alienation are too much to bear?

A prayer for today

What needs to be adjusted to make the stranger feel at home? Help! Amen