

## Sermon for Jesus College Oxford, 23rd October 2016

### Social Justice and the Mission of the Church

#### Loving the Stranger

#### Readings Deut 10:17-22; John 4:7-15; Ps 133

A story....

In July 2016 a protest rally was held in my home city, Norwich, in protest at the result of the EU Referendum. At 3am the following morning, a brick was thrown through the window of an Eastern European food shop in that same city, along with a petrol bomb that caused fire damage. The owner and her daughter were asleep in the flat above the shop. They were scared for their lives.

On the face of it, this is a bad news story. Except for what happened next. Whilst the police kept 'an open mind' about suggestions that the attack was racially motivated, a fundraising appeal was launched by a local resident, who posted on a crowd funding website: "While protesters rallied against Brexit in Norwich last night, an Eastern European food store was petrol-bombed. The owner has no insurance. She could do with an act of kindness from her neighbours. Please donate. A small token will go a long way."

The 'ask' was for a few hundred pounds to enable the shop to start trading again. Within a few days, the sum raised was £28,509. Not only that, but messages of support began to appear, spontaneously, written on post-its and cards, and stuck to the window of the shop.

The God of gods and the Lord of lords is characterised in Deuteronomy by two things – the protection of the vulnerable (widows and orphans), and love for the stranger. These things are presented as *the very essence of justice*.

Right now, particularly in our UK context, it seems that migrants, of all kinds, are our 'strangers'. Worldwide, people are being displaced in unprecedented numbers by catastrophic war and conflict, by the effects of climate change, and by extreme poverty. People are on the move because they desire, simply, to survive. Widows and orphans abound, their vulnerability often further exploited by people traffickers, who sell women and children into slavery and servitude.

Yet rather than loving the stranger, our collective response, especially in the political sphere, is one of rejection. Why?

According to the philosopher Julia Kristeva there is a category of stuff which is considered neither subject nor object, but abject. 'It is not', she says, 'lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'. The loathsome, she says, is that which disobeys classification and does not respect boundaries.

And in her book *Purity and Danger*, anthropologist Mary Douglas puts forward her now famous definition of dirt as 'matter out of place'. That which society constructs as 'dirty' or 'polluted' is not so because of any intrinsic qualities of its own, but is a relative concept. A shoe on your foot, in contact with the ground, is not dirty. Take it off and put it on the kitchen table and it becomes so.

So, with human beings, context is everything. When God says, 'You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt', I think this goes beyond, 'you should love the stranger because you know how it feels to be one'. It is, rather, a recognition that all of us are potentially strangers. We may live securely now, as part of the dominant group, which makes us simply 'ordinary'. But at any point we could be plucked from that location and find ourselves elsewhere, or flung into a different situation in the same location. Either way, we may find ourselves to be newly marginalized and unsafe. Vulnerable. This is happening to thousands of people in our society through job loss, bereavement, debt, mental and physical ill health, increasing levels of racist and xenophobic hate crime, and the increasing frailty that comes with growing older.

Those who migrate physically, most obviously cross boundaries and are therefore perceived to be a danger or a threat. But there are others whose essence causes horror amongst some sections of our communities. Trans,

intersex and genderqueer people defy categorisation as they transcend the gender binary that keeps the rest of us in our place; lesbian, gay and bisexual people likewise disrupt the perceived necessary connection between gender, and opposite-sex sexual object choice. Homeless people may be living on the street, and that is not what the street is for; those in mental distress may display forms of behaviour that challenge social norms. Stigma is the result.

Our gospel reading provides an interesting insight into how Jesus dealt with the stranger, and the common-sense 'othering' processes of his own social context.

With the woman at the well, Jesus initiates a conversation with one who should have been his 'other'. She is a woman, and she is a Samaritan, but nevertheless he tells her to give him a drink. The dialogue that follows is intriguing. It is banter between equals. She challenges his request on the grounds that he is a Jew and she a Samaritan; his retort is that if she had recognised the opportunity his request afforded her, she could have had access to 'living water'. She comes back with, in effect, who do you think you are to promise this? Are you saying you are of greater historical significance than Jacob, whose well this is? When Jesus explains that he is talking about eternal life that will be more like a welling spring than a deep well, she expresses a desire for the living water.

There's an intriguing mutuality about this encounter. And as the story continues beyond what we heard read this evening, it becomes clear that he knows things about this woman that he has no reason to know (that is, that she has had four husbands and now lives with a man who is not her husband), and this leads to a deep theological interaction, culminating in her recognising his identity as the Messiah who is coming. Here is powerful mutual recognition and understanding. Their conversation is interrupted by the disciples, who are of course perplexed by the fact that it is happening at all, and the woman returns to her city saying to her family, 'come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done.' In other words, 'come and see a man who really gets my life'.

And the Samaritan woman was just one of many people whom Jesus freed from social stigma. There was Legion, for example, who was so distressed he self-harmed with rocks and chains, and lived naked amongst the tombs, outside the boundaries of his town; there was Zaccheus, the tax collector, who had 'gone over to the dark side', colluding with the Roman occupiers to extort

money from his own people. There was the woman 'caught in the very act of adultery' who had thereby broken a fundamental rule of Jewish society. And the woman with the flow of blood was ritually unclean, but Jesus called her 'daughter'.

Jesus liberated potential within people that only he could see. He cut people loose from their physical, psychological and spiritual chains. He proclaimed liberty to oppressed people.

He embraced those whom others considered to be strangers through listening to them, hearing them, and understanding. 'What do you want me to do for you?' he said. We see in his encounters what the psychologist Carl Rogers would call an effective empathic response. Rogers describes what happens in therapy when real empathy is present, 'I have noticed that the more deeply I hear the meaning of a person, the more there is that happens. Almost always, when the person realizes he has been deeply heard, his eyes moisten. I think in some real sense he is weeping for joy. It is as though he were saying, 'Thank God, somebody has heard me. Someone knows what it's like to be me'...By that one simple response he is released from his loneliness, he has become a human being again.'

Jesus made strangers into human beings again. Their response to this was intense joy. They gave themselves to him. They wanted to commit. They desired to follow.

But where did his empathy come from? When Jesus looked into the eyes of those in the teeth of alienation and marginalisation, he understood them completely. He got them. And here, I think, is why. Jesus is the only human being ever before, or since, to know what it feels like to transcend, and thereby dissolve, the most important and fundamental boundary of all. That between the divine and the human. How lonely must that have felt? He was the quintessential boundary-crosser, and therefore embodied all that it meant to be a stranger, in a way that he alone understood.

Back to our opening story. Mary Douglas says, 'The quest for purity is pursued by rejection...It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be *hard and dead as a stone* when we get it....Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity, of compromise.'

Those who throw petrol bombs, or exercise more subtle forms of rejection of otherness, are siding with contraction and death. But fullness of life is to be

found in diversity. God made a world which tends towards diversity, and therefore fertility and creativity. In our Psalm we are told that living together in unity is like precious oil running down. It is God's blessing – life forevermore. It is the living water that Jesus talked about with the Samaritan woman. The 'other' who knew the truth about Jesus a long time before many others.

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