

Recognising strangers as our friends

*A sermon preached by Prof Rev Rob Gilbert on Sunday 29 May 2016 in St Peter's Wolvercote
Readings: Trinity 1, 2016: 1 Kings 8.22-23,41-43; Galatians 1.1-12; Luke 7.1-10.*

Today's readings provide us with a strong basis for reflecting together on the issue of foreigners in a strange land. King Solomon prays to God that He will hear foreigners in the land of Israel who make their prayers faithfully, that He will hear them in heaven, in his dwelling-place, and do what the foreigner asks, so that all people may know His name and honour Him. Paul comments on the presence of difference, or foreignness, in the Christian community, because different versions of the gospel are being preached, and says that there should *be* no foreignness, there should *be* no difference, because there is just one gospel. And in the reading from Luke we have a justly famous story about how Jesus heals the slave of a Roman centurion who is himself a beloved foreigner, a stranger in the midst of a community that he has command of, but for whom he has built a synagogue. In that Luke story friendship and fellowship is shown by foreigners to each other in several ways. The foreign centurion lives in friendship with the local Israelites. And the Roman centurion's foreign slave is valued so highly that he will actually ask the help of a *Jewish* teacher, Jesus, for his healing. In the story of the centurion, his slave and Jesus we have a whole network of multicultural affection and respect worthy of one of the nicer parts of the world in the 21st Century.

I think we should face the fact that these are timely readings to have today, in a world in which we are witnessing vast migration, as refugees and the poor seek a better home. These are timely readings for a world in which thousands of innocent people like you and me but foreign, have lost their lives in the *search* for a better home. These are timely readings to think about in a country in which a key point for discussion at the moment is immigration – are migrants parasites, are they welcome, or are they an opportunity? Beyond any practical detail, these readings should make us think that, whatever else, to use the lives of migrants and refugees as a topic for angry, shouting rhetoric is a scandal – because these are people like you and me, and God loves them. The answers to the challenges posed by refugees and migrants are not obvious, they are certainly not easy, but the way to approach them *has* to be from a baseline of compassion and of recognising our common humanity with them. Just like with the homeless, with prisoners, with the unemployed, with the disabled: with migrants and refugees too, the bottom line is compassion.

Because it has always been a key, central, basic tenet of Judaism and then of Christianity that we *welcome* the stranger and *befriend* the alien in our midst, as simply underscored for us today by Solomon, by Paul and by the interactions of the centurion, his slave, and our Lord.

Let's just look at each of these examples in turn. Solomon is praying that God will hear the faithful prayers of a foreigner, of someone who is definitely not Israelite but has come to Israel seeking the truth. Today, in St Peter's, we have some common cause with Solomon, because our community emphatically includes people who are Syrian or Egyptian, German or Malaysian, as well as people who are British. In Oxford the Peace Walk each June where people of good will from a host of different faiths demonstrate their friendship in a public way, is also in tune with Solomon, because all together we seek peace and we seek the truth. All together, I think, we are effectively saying to God "When a foreigner comes...Lord hear him".

But sometimes Christians will find themselves at odds with people who come to their home country to worship God, and claiming to seek the truth, but who don't see the world the way they do. For Christians the divide between people of a more liberal outlook and those of a more conservative outlook is a case in point. The liberal-minded might take exception with conservative Christians from Africa, Australia, North or South America. The conservative-minded might take exception with liberal theological outlooks around the world. In either case there is a danger, it seems to me, that people on one side see those on the other who have a different point of view as not actually seeking the truth. Both sides should remember Solomon's prayer: "When a foreigner comes...Lord hear him". God hearing the prayers of his people doesn't necessarily mean *any* of them are right, that a liberal or a conservative perspective is right, it just means that all God's people, local and foreign, are loved. God hearing our prayers, means that we are loved, not that we are right.

Which brings me to Paul: grappling with the issue of the alternative versions of the gospel that are apparently being preached. He is saying: There aren't alternative versions of the good news, there is just one gospel. Of course that is true – there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. But as a matter of fact we Christians do find foreignness in our midst – when it comes to ethical issues perhaps most particularly, but as well in different approaches to worship and to understanding what God has done for us in Jesus. Paul wants to remind us, there is no alternative Gospel, there is one Lord, and the name of God is mercy, as Pope Francis continues to remind us. Paul is arguing that we are wrong to be partisan, because there is no division in Christ. And there is no division in Christ because it is not from Paul, or Cephas, or Apollos or any other brother or sister that we ultimately receive the good news of God in Jesus, but from the Lord himself. All that matters, Paul is saying, is to open your ears to hear the truth. So if Solomon asks that the truthfulness of a foreigner's prayers be heard, Paul asks that the Galatians remember that the truth they have is not of human origin but from God. And both would concur, I think, that the name of God is mercy.

The centurion and his slave and their interaction with Jesus is a wonderful parable for our own times. The centurion is the valued foreigner, the foreigner who is respected and respectful – and so he builds a synagogue for the town that he oversees. In turn, he is valued for his kindness which cancels the foreignness he obviously has and the power he obviously wields so that he and the local folk can live in friendship. We remember this centurion in our own services, when we say: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you; but only say the word and I shall be healed". We are 21st century Christians quoting a 1st century Roman centurion because of the healing of *his* slave by a Jewish Rabbi.

It's not the same, but some of you will remember that it was reported in 2013 how the Muslim community in Bradford has saved the local synagogue, fundraising to repair the building and support its running costs, and they have shared in worship together. It's not the same but a report from Syria at the end of last year tells of Muslims going to a local Catholic church to celebrate the birth of the Prophet Mohammed, and of Christians going to the Mosque to celebrate Christmas. And from Iraq it tells of Muslims in Baghdad putting up Christmas trees as a sign of their closeness to Christians. As with the centurion and his neighbours, in these modern examples too the love of strangers for one another overcomes any differences they have. The centurion's love for the community in his charge led him to build them a synagogue; the large Bradford Muslim community loves the tiny – about 200-strong – Jewish community and pays for their synagogue; in Syria, in Iraq, in the United Kingdom the love of Jew, Christian and Muslim can overcome our real differences with one another.

A sphere in which we see this acted out is in our church schools, where the Church of England has a key role. There are one million children in this country being educated in Church of England schools. The primary purpose of those schools is the service of the *local* community and where that community is Muslim, obviously so are many or all of the children at the school. There *are* Church of England schools in which every pupil is from a Muslim background, and this is a problem for no one. It is not a problem because the children and their parents respect what the church and its schools stand for, because the church respects the community it serves, and because each is seeking understanding of the other. It is also not a problem because of a common, shared set of values grounded in a theological vision of the purpose and shape of human life.

Because, indeed, if in this country now there is foreignness, there is difference and misunderstanding, it is not so much between people of different faiths, as between people of faith and those of none. And just to make it clear what I am saying here, I would include among the people of *faith* those who are passionate atheists on grounds of principle, and those who are committed agnostics on ground of honesty. They together with people who *believe* in God are in contrast to any who are scornful and dismissive of values, of principle and of honesty.

So, today, as in the past, it is not unusual for us to find that we have more in common with someone who is a stranger or foreigner, whether by nationality or by belief, than with someone who has the same background as us. This is what Solomon and Paul recognised, and this is what Jesus's healing of the centurion's slave acts out. "*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*" Amen.