

Breaking down barriers

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges in St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 6th September 2009 (Trinity 13)

Gospel reading: Mark 7.24-37

²⁴Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁸But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' ²⁹Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.' ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. ³¹Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. ³²They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

Reading through the Bible, it would be easy to conclude that God doesn't really like the rich or powerful! That at the worst, getting into heaven will be impossible for them, at the best it's going to involve getting through some very tight spots. Along with this can come the idea that God favours the poor - that being 'poor' automatically qualifies you for a place in heaven.

These ideas are now part of our own society. There is a tendency to think that all bankers, politicians, people with wealth or power are dishonest, and that everyone who is poor must be innocent, a victim of fate or society.

ALL these ideas are of course FALSE generalisations:- If you read the Bible carefully you find that it doesn't condemn 'the rich', but those who love riches rather than God; although some bankers and politicians ARE dishonest (we've heard a lot about them recently) many are honest and caring, and there have been countless rich or powerful people who have done much to support the weak and vulnerable (and not just to avoid paying taxes); although there ARE millions of people living in poverty through no fault of their own (often as a result of the greed of those dishonest rich and powerful) there are also people who use 'poverty' – or the external trappings of poverty - as an excuse for living off others.

All of this illustrates something that Jesus was constantly teaching – that it is impossible to know a person by external appearances and actions - it is only what is going on in the heart that matters. This was an extraordinary message for Jesus to proclaim. He lived in a society which had 'prejudice' built into it. A person's place in Jewish society was quite clearly defined, and many people were considered 'unclean' or cast out of society completely because of nationality, occupation, sickness, disability. In many ways our own society is much better than this:- the class system has lost much of its power; racial, sexual, religious discrimination are

officially illegal; however much it fails, there is an official commitment to care for the sick and disabled, and to feed and clothe the poor wherever they are. But of course prejudice still abounds!

Some of you may watch 'Keeping up Appearances'. The leading lady, Hyacinth Bucket, has her own very clear idea of who and what is socially acceptable. This doesn't include having 'Bucket' as a surname, so she calls herself Hyacinth 'Bouquet'. We may laugh at this 'caricature', but good comedy reflects real life and so I suspect that most of us know someone like Hyacinth – even if we don't want to admit being like her ourselves! We don't like to admit that when we're at a party we try to talk to the people who are well off or well known, we don't like to admit that we'd rather not be seen with the scruffy neighbour or relative. And we may not like to admit, either, that sometimes we do our 'good works' just so that we can be seen to be doing them and earn praise and admiration from others (in Hyacinth's case, from the vicar).

But worse than any of this is the message that some people who call themselves Christians send out - that they consider woman, homosexuals, people of other faiths as inferior or outcast! Jesus Christ tells us that this is wrong - we should only be concerned about what is going on in the heart (ours or another's) not with external appearances, deeds. Jesus didn't just PREACH his message, he lived it. He talked with, ate with, healed anyone who approached him in humility.

Jesus was happy to enter into conversation with the Syro-Phoenecian woman - an outcast as far as the Jews were concerned, so his response to her seems rather surprising. Many Bible scholars have attempted to explain this. Their views would take a whole sermon, but one comment struck me particularly - that the woman wouldn't actually have been at all surprised or upset by Jesus' initial response. Most Jews wouldn't have even spoken to her, considering her quite beneath them or God's grace. But something about Jesus released in this woman the courage to ask and fight for what she needed. So whatever the actual circumstances Jesus' conversation with this 'outcast' empowered her, and brought her the miracle she desired.

Jesus demonstrated time and time again that God's grace is offered to everyone. There isn't a form to fill in, a list of external conditions to be met. It isn't reserved for those who go to Church or do good works! It is freely and unconditionally given to everyone who comes to him in humility and love. The reason for this is that God's LOVE for each of us is unconditional and, surely, love is the only thing that can really overcome the barriers that divide people.

Love doesn't just 'reach over' social barriers. It doesn't do 'good works' for the poor in some condescending way that ensures that the barriers remain to protect us from the person on the other side! And love doesn't 'cultivate' the rich or influential in order to get something from them while still despising them. Love actually breaks barriers down, and we all experience something of this in our everyday lives.

Whatever parents hope for in their children, we go on supporting them through all their teenage experiments, and even if they finally choose a path that we might despise in others, the only thing that really breaks our hearts is if communication with them breaks down. And 'falling in love' is no respecter of 'social classifications'. Loving 'across boundaries' is the stuff of so much literature and art. And if romantic love **didn't**

blind us to differences (and even to each other's more unattractive qualities) many of us might never have got married (or STAYED married for 25 years !*).

Such love, then, destroys barriers. It doesn't mean accepting evil behaviour or actions, but it does mean trying to understand the other person, looking for the GOOD in them and trying to release it, and always being ready to offer and receive compassion and love. And such love doesn't destroy difference. It will encourage difference if this 'empowers' the beloved. But differences cease to be walls dividing us, instead we find that they enrich and enlarge our lives.

But such love is only part of the way Christ loves us, and how he calls us to love all people - even those we instinctively fear or are repelled by. This is a terrifying command! It will be impossible for us to fulfil it completely, we are all human. It will be especially difficult if we try to do it on our own. The only way we can even begin to do it is by first coming to Christ, to open our hearts and minds to the unconditional love he has for us. Then he will strengthen us through his Holy Spirit to try to break down and destroy our prejudices and fears. Then whoever we meet, in whatever situation, the Christ in us will be greeting, in love, the Christ in the other. Amen.

Viv Bridges