

Sermon for 27th June 2010

Tolerance

Trinity 4 (Luke 9:53-62)

It may not be obvious, but this morning's reading talks about tolerance. Jesus is showing us how we should behave in the presence of people who think and behave differently to the way we do. People who do not share our views and beliefs - our ways of doing things.

First, some background to our gospel reading. Jesus was going from Galilee to Jerusalem. There was a short route and a long route:

- Short route (3 days): direct road south (good), but it took you through Samaria (bad). Samaritans hostile towards Jews; Jews regarded Samaritans as unclean.
- Long route (4 days): east, across the Jordan, then south, then turn west back across the Jordan and into Jerusalem (good, it avoids Samaria). This was the preferred route for Jews, because it was less hassle.

But Jesus chooses the short route! You can imagine the disciples expecting difficulty, and they're not disappointed. In the face of 'problem' people who refuse them a room for the night, what do the disciples do? The usual human response - get back at them, retaliate. Full of their new-found zeal and over-inflated egos (Luke 9:6 and 46), James & John want to call down fire to destroy them, like Elijah did to King Ahaziah's men (2 Kings 1). But Ahaziah had deliberately turned his back on the God of Israel in favour of the pagan god of Baal. These Samaritans had just refused Jesus a room for the night. Not for the first time, the disciples have lost the plot and Jesus gives them a good telling off.

So in the face of this intolerant village, look at what Jesus does: three things that we could learn from Jesus:

1. **Don't avoid people who are different.** Jesus deliberately journeys through their community, and watch how he does it. Not making a big song & dance as he went. No preaching, no healing, no crowd-pulling, just 'being' among the Samaritan people. A striking feature of our lives is that despite our diverse national population, most of us spend nearly all of our time with 'people like us'. Our education affects who we spend time with at work, which affects our earnings which influences who our neighbours are, and both of these affect who we spend our leisure time with. Few of us have to spend much time with people not like us, and when given the choice, we know who we prefer to be with.

Problem is, because we never meet the 'other' people, what we don't know about them we make up. We may tell ourselves we know what we're doing, but we risk imagining all sorts of things on tiny shreds of fact. And then when we do finally meet, there can be a real flare-

up. This is why the disciples have lost the plot – they don't really understand the Samaritan point of view.

So we need to be like Jesus, spending time, just 'being' with people who are different to us – not trying to change them or control them, just being among them.

2. **Don't retaliate.** One of the hardest natural instincts any of us have to contend with is the need to retaliate or to blame others when we come up against people whose attitudes and actions cut across our own. But in the face of a very personal rejection, Jesus does not retaliate. It's highly unusual – unique, even! I'd be wanting to demand 'what's wrong with my money?' at the very least a 'disgusted of Nazareth' letter to the village council or a complaint to the Samaritan Tourist Board – some means of giving vent. But here, Jesus just quietly moves on to the next village (no comment is made, so I assume they all get beds for the night).
3. **Love people, despite their differences.** Jesus' tolerance is not borne out of indifference nor of suppressed anger (where we're too polite to vent our anger out loud, so we let it go later on, out of earshot). Jesus actively loves these people even though they are unwelcoming to him and it's very personal. Look at John chapter 4: see how Jesus treats the Samaritan woman at the well with such compassion and insight that she becomes the first evangelist.

Some years ago during Advent, I was walking up the high street to church for night prayer. Ahead were about 2 dozen young people gathered outside a convenience store (usual thing: a few tins, smoking, noisy but not aggressive). We were about 20 yards off and needed to cross the road anyway so we did, avoiding walking past them. Then as we passed opposite they started throwing stones: not at us, but deliberately at the wall above our heads. It was attention seeking behaviour, but we took exception to the stone-throwing, which led to a lot of 'cross words' being exchanged and gave these young people further evidence that adults are just against them.

How different would it have been if we had not crossed the road? If we had not avoided these people, but said 'hello' as we walked by? If we had not retaliated so strongly and inflamed the situation? If we had loved them enough to wonder why so many kids would rather be cold outdoors all evening than in warm homes? What if I hadn't taken a less risky route and remembered 1 John 4:18: that 'perfect love drives out fear'?

I wonder: who do you avoid? Who do you steer around rather than spend time with? Who do you retaliate against? And how could you love those people? Remember God's not asking us to like them, but God is asking us to love them.

And when you have spotted who it is you avoid, you'll be thinking how hard it is to do all these things. But this is central to what Jesus wants us to do: to fish for people (see Mark 1:17). To

love them, be alongside them, take the knocks when they come, and despite all that, still be with them. That's a big ask!

Which is where the second half of our Gospel reading comes in. In summary, Jesus is saying 'What's the most important thing in your life? Is it your home? No. Your parents? No. Your children, husband or wife? No. The most important thing in all of our lives needs to be God.

Matthew 6:33 - Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you as well. Home, parents, families, they are all important. But God is most important. Put God first and the rest will fall into place.

If we seek God above all else, the Holy Spirit will give us the power to be with those who are different, to not retaliate, and to love those who are the hardest-to-love!

Amen.

Blessings,
Kevin