

Foreign Insights – Sunday 9th October 2016

This week the word ‘foreign’ has taken on huge significance. The government wants to take steps for companies to list who are the foreigners in their work force. Foreign is at one level a neutral word – it just means someone who isn’t from the country we’re situated in – but it carries with it negative subtexts – of *other, different*.

I am a foreigner in London. I’m not English. I’m Welsh. But it’s not a term I’d readily employ about myself. I’ve attended meals with Hasidic Jews and been asked to my great surprise if I was a Gentile. I am, but it’s not a term I’ve ever employed about myself. I’ve been to screenings of films at a Muslim Cultural Centre in London, where I was welcomed as a non-Muslim. I did not enjoy that experience... the experience of being labelled as something without my consent. I do not see myself as a non-anything.

But this labelling and this suspicion is a preoccupation of humanity. A huge amount of our mental energy is used up in thinking about who is *out* and who is *in*. Our human nature contains huge amounts of good – compassion, kindness, heroic acts of bravery – but there are three fundamental flaws that are the source of all our trouble:

- 1) Our tendency to feed the desires of our own ego, rather than loving the Lord our God with all our might
- 2) Our tendency to worship, love, serve MONEY rather than God
- 3) Our tendency to divide humanity into groups – that create a world of *them* and **us**

It’s this last fundamental flaw that I want to focus on this morning.

Whenever we read the Bible – and especially the gospels – we need to think about three things: context, crux and current application. What is the context of this piece of scripture, what is the crux of the message and current application – how might we apply this to our lives in 2016? We mustn’t simply view this text as historically interesting – or go straight for a personal meaning – we must weave a path that takes into account context, crux and current application.

So context – what do we need to highlight in today’s reading of Jesus’ encounter with the 10 lepers?

The first thing we need to highlight are the political tensions.

Well Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem through a region between Samaria and Galilee – it’s a type of no man’s land – an in-between place. We’ll know from our own travels that those kind of border places can be places of fluidity and change – a place where we might learn something new – a blurry place, a less black and white place – where a revelation might come to us. We know too that the Jews did not get on with the Samaritans. They hated them. They were suspicious of them. They thought they followed an untrue religion. They thought they were not to be trusted.

And we know from our own culture – wherever we are from - there will be a people group just like this who are despised – in a them and us kind of a way – look at the struggles between the peoples of the Balkans states, northern and southern Ireland, Americans and Mexicans, white and black, Jews... gypsies.... down and outs... eastern Europeans, Muslims, the Israeli/Palestine conflict – the list is endless. Sometimes we learn from our mistakes and broken countries, like for example South Africa, begin to walk a path back to wholeness, but this stark and awful reality is central to humanity's inability to live with itself – central to all wars and all acts of violence, all racism, all prejudice – this characteristic of splitting the world into them and us – and despising people groups - **on mass, in ignorance and without thought.**

We all do this. You. Me. Everyone. Some of us are trying harder not to do it. But we all do it. We all consciously or unconsciously group *with* people *like us* and are a bit suspicious of people *not like us*.

So the piece of ground Jesus is travelling through is a no man's land – perhaps a bit scruffy and sits between two divided people groups – the Jews and the Samaritans.

And into this space come 10 lepers.

So the second thing we need to highlight in terms of context is the plight of the lepers in Jesus' day.

Now I doubt any of us have ever met a leper – so we have to remind ourselves that in Jesus' day, leprosy was a common disease that ate the skin of a person – so that they eventually lost their fingers, parts of their face, their limbs. They looked disgusting. It was highly contagious. If you had this NO ONE wanted you. I think the closest thing we've come to in the west was the outbreak of the AIDs virus in the 80s. And perhaps more recently, families who were ostracized due to the Ebola outbreak.

The only people who would hang out with lepers were other lepers. They were excluded from community life, from religious life, from family life – they were sent away to the bits of land no one wanted – to suffer together. To survive... to exist... together.

So when they see Jesus and say, "Master, have mercy on us." Can we even begin to imagine the desperation? Can we find anything in ourselves that has experience exclusion and isolation to this level? They were sick, desperate, lonely, in pain, in mental agony.

And Jesus tells them to go and show themselves to the priest. Which they do, without question – perhaps because they are obedient? Perhaps because they've got no other options – who knows... but on the way they are healed. Not only are they well, but they get

their *life* back – restored to their families, to their community, to the religious community – they are made whole and they are healed.

So what's the crux of this gospel? What's the heart of this passage?

Is it love the lepers? Is it follow Jesus' words and you'll be healed.

But hang on a second, we've missed a bit.

10 are healed. But only one returns to Jesus to thank him. He thanks Jesus by prostrating himself – his thanks is deep and wide. So is the crux: be thankful?

Hang on. We've still missed a bit. The one that came to give thanks was a Samaritan. Jesus says: "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this **foreigner**?"

Jesus uses the actions of this **foreigner** to shame his own people. The other 9 were Jews – ONE OF US – the one who thanked Jesus: ONE OF THEM. A **foreigner**.

Throughout the gospels Jesus' interactions with foreigners and the ones that normal society rejects constantly show, through Jesus' actions, God's love towards the outsider. Constantly show that through the *faith* of the outsider, the *actions* of the outsider, we will learn something significant about the kingdom of God. That is – those of us who consider ourselves to be *insiders* – must look to those we consider to be *outsiders* to see the hand of God at work in the world. The kingdom of God will be revealed to us through the broken and the rejected, through the foreigner and the widow, through the poor and the downcast, through those on the fringes – through those we put out on the rubbish heap.

So what's a **current application** here?

To me this week, the word foreigner has taken on a very potent meaning. It's a strange word.

In English foreign is defined as

1: of, from, in, or characteristic of a country or language other than one's own.

Or

2: strange and unfamiliar

In French it's *etranger* – which shares the same root as *etrange* – which means strange

In Latin it's *aliena*, which gives us the root of alien.

In probably all languages the emphasis is on someone who is not from here – not from our tribe – who is one of them, not one of us – this sense of strange, or alien, or other. The

emphasis is on difference, on separation, on division – NOT on our shared common humanity.

And yet my friends, this is not the way of Jesus.

The gospels – particularly Jesus' actions and words in the gospels, constantly overturn this human way of seeing things – and bring into play a gospel-centered, kingdom-orientated way of seeing the world – where the foreigner is the one who really acted as God's child – who gave thanks for his healing and wholeness, who got the whole picture, who saw more than just his individual healing, but saw the kingdom of God breaking through.

So in these days of increased racism, in these days when any foreigner in Britain might be feeling stressed and not welcome – whether that's a Dr in the NHS, a nurse, a builder, a scientist, a teacher, a university lecturer, an artist, a writer – what will we do as a church – how will we stand up as individuals – and as a corporate body to say – Jesus tore down the barriers – I welcome you as my brother, my sister – I welcome you.

We have to challenge ourselves first – as a church here – in our own particular family and friendship groups – do we welcome the foreigner? In our work? In our street? In our politics? In our prayer life? But we cannot idly stand by and think that this has nothing to do with us.

I want to leave you with the words of Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) who was a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps.

Niemöller is perhaps best remembered for this quotation, I want to close with today:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

May God give us ears to hear, eyes to see, the courage to speak and the heart to welcome the foreigner, in the name of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Sheridan James, notes from the sermon preached on 9 October. The 'live' event is always better, but these notes give you a flavour of the sermon.