

Reflection for Sunday 7th February 2021

Why do we build those walls?

Why that insistence on building walls? You realise I am not referring to builders set up much needed housing. It is quite clear why those walls are built – the stronger and safer they are, the better. I was wondering about the walls of separation that we human beings set up that discriminate people, or nations, or cultures. Those walls that are so difficult to tear down. Why do we build those walls?

During the last few days, I have been re-reading a book: *Living the questions*; each time I pick it up I find something new, and so challenging. I found this short story told by Nikos Kazantzakis (author of *Zorba the Greek*) particularly interesting: *He talks about walking the dust paths of his native Crete, when an elderly woman passed by, carrying a basket of figs. She stopped, picked out two figs and gave them to him. He asked her: Do you know me? She looked back at him and said “No”, and then added “do I have to know you to give you something? You are a human being, aren’t you? So am I. Isn’t that enough?*

How would you respond to that question? How does it challenge our faith?

It would often seem that as the world is today, this sounds like a silly question. In many different situations, to recognize our common humanity is not enough, and we turn to so many different categories to dismiss others: gender, race, economics, status, sexuality, religion, language, country where someone was born... a combination of any (or all of these) causes pain, persecution, discrimination, hatred. These are the walls we build, and the excuse we use in building them are: to protect us from others or to exclude others. What I find impossible to understand is how any of this can be substantiated by our faith in Jesus Christ.

Let us now turn to the first Bible reading – **Ephesians 2; 11-22**

To fully understand this reading, let’s explore the place: *Ephesus was an ancient Greek city on the coast of Ionia, in İzmir Province, Turkey. It was built in the 10th century BC. It was a centre of learning and the birthplace and home of the great Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. Women enjoyed rights and privileges equal to men and there are records of female artists, sculptors, painters, and teachers. Ephesus was one of the seven churches of Asia that are cited in the Book of Revelation. The Gospel of John may have been written here. This may help us understand what the Bible passage refers to then.*

We read that Christ is our peace and is the one who breaks down the dividing wall, the hostility between Gentiles and Jews. In Christ we are no longer strangers and aliens, in Christ the whole structure comes together and grows into a holy temple.

And now we turn to the second Bible reading – **Galatians 3; 2-28**

Here we are reminded that in Christ we are children of God, and as such there is no Jew or Greek (=Gentile), no slave or free, no male or female...we are one in Christ Jesus. Of course, we will continue to have nationality and gender; but they can no longer be reasons for separation.

And yet. And yet, when we see the world around us, we realise so much of what these readings are asking from us is far from happening, and as we have seen in recent developments in many countries, this involves many people who identify as Christian. On what grounds then can the prejudice, the hatred, the discrimination, the persecutions be sustained? What comes first in our life: our ideas, our political allegiances or our commitment to the message of Jesus of life in fullness for all?

So, what is it then that defines us? From the same book I mentioned earlier, there is a paraphrase on C.S. Lewis: “can you think of the type of person who might make you uncomfortable if they sat next to you? May that person come into your life soon! That’s where true discipleship is tested.” Challenging words are these. And such a challenge sparks hope, and we certainly need hope in these times.

So let us go back to Jesus and his ministry: a tax collector who worked for the occupying Roman power becomes a disciple, a woman with a haemorrhage follows him, a rabbi asks him to heal a sick daughter, a Samaritan becomes the example of love and care, a doubter who wants to put his finger in the wounds is part of the group, as well as the one who sells him out, or the one who using swear words denies he knows anything about him – and we are told that having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. Jesus loves. **Jesus loves all. Jesus loves us to the end.** That is what it is all about. One day, in the not-too-distant future, it would be good to have a conversation about this, not because we do not try, but because we need to be prepared to respond to so many in this world who hate to the end, and still call themselves followers of the Christ.

And let me close with very short references to Old Testament passages which are the root of all that has been said so far. Again, I find these two really “old” quotes, a source of inspiration and of hope.

- For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10; 17-19)
- When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19; 9-10)

The God we believe in, is one who has a special place for the people who have nobody else that cares for them: the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor. God provides for them and calls us to be providers still today. As we have seen, there is no way we can justify building walls of separation, rather we have been called to recognize we belong to the ONE family of God’s children, through the love Jesus Christ has shown. Our call not to build walls, rather in their place to build bridges; bridges where all people can come and go, and at each end of the bridges a mat that says WELCOME.

“A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be - and not building bridges - is not Christian”. Pope Francis **So, how are we doing on this faith journey of life?**

Collect for this Sunday: Lord of fierce compassion, you name the forces of death in our hearts and institutions and even in the holy places: lift from us the canopy of fear that feeds on repression and pushes away what it cannot abide; go with us to dark and lonely places where we can learn again who we are called to be; through Jesus Christ, the healer of creation. Amen
(Prayers for an Inclusive Church)