

Immanuel, Sunday 3rd July 2022

Luke 7; 36-50

Destroying barriers and walls

I thought quite a bit about the choice of words for the title today; I probably would have gone for a “softer” word instead of “destroying”, but that is what the NIV of the Bible has in the quote from Ephesians with which I began the service, so if it was good enough for them, it is good enough for us, so destroying stays.

The quote is from the early times of the church, when Paul wrote his letters, long before any Gospel was written, and yet the Gospels try to collect the sayings and actions of Jesus, which become an instruction for us – so my question is – are we any good at destroying barriers and walls? If so, what barriers and what walls are we destroying? Are there any we are allowing to stand untouched?

Let me begin with a short story which involves the famous writer Nikos Kazantzakis (the one of Zorba the Greek fame) and an elderly old woman. It happened on a dusty road in Crete. The old woman was carrying a basket filled with figs, and when she saw this man walking towards her she picked out two figs and gave them to him. Caught by surprise, the man asked her “Do you know me?”. She looked back in amazement and simply said: “No, I don’t know you. Do I have to know you to do something for you? You are a human being just like I am, to me that is enough”. There was this old woman destroying barriers and walls.

I also want to refer to a book, lent to me by Anne Hopkins; I was so challenged that I bought my own copy – Naught for your comfort, written by Trevor Huddleston, who at one time of his life was a curate at St Mark’s here in Swindon. He was sent to South Africa by his church, and he certainly destroyed barriers and walls, Once a Cabinet Minister (in South Africa) said of him: “in the middle ages people like Huddleston would have been burnt at the stake”, and an officer of the South African Information Service said: “he deserves to be drummed out of the country or strung up from the nearest lamp-post as a renegade”. While on of his African students said: “I wish he was black”. Was he a renegade, was he an enemy of the state, or was he simply doing what was God’s will – destroying barriers and walls? I am convinced he was doing what Jesus wanted him to do!

So what does Jesus say and do that will help us in the task ahead? We don’t have to look to far: the despised Samaritans become the centre of two narratives – the woman by the well and the parable of the Good Samaritan; the rule against contact with women during their menstruation when he cures the women who has been suffering from blood loss for 12 years or touching a dead body when he brings back to life the only child of a widow. And of course, the reading we have just heard.

A dinner party at the house of a distinguished religious leader, where this woman enters (uninvited of course). All those guests despise her as immoral, a sinner. She is rejected and even condemned for doing what she does – the scandal of letting her hair down, she washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and then dries them with her hair and anoints him with expensive ointment. Can you hear the scandalised voices in the background: “If this Jesus were really a prophet he would know what sort of women she is and would not let her near him”? Talk of setting up walls of separation. They don’t see another human being, they only see a despised “object” – they call her a sinner, we never know her name.

Jesus then turns to his host and calls him by his name: Simon. And says, you reject this woman for what she has done, while you never received me as a guest, you showed me no love at all while she has not stopped showing me her love. Your heart has turned to stone, while hers is a hurting heart that reaches out. While Jesus says all this, he is showing those sitting round the table how far away they are from the values of the Kingdom, while in what Jesus has done, and will continue to do, he is showing us what the values of the Kingdom mean in life. While some create barriers and walls, Jesus is destroying them.

And what about this, our XXI century. What barriers are still there, even strengthened? Barriers that isolate, discriminate, exclude, even in extreme cases kill. This happens all over the place through language barriers, through beliefs, through expectations, through education. It happens in class barriers, sexual orientation barriers, in economic barriers; even in the way we relate to others – the words for hospitality and hostility have a common root – *philonexia*: the love for strangers (hospitality), and *xenophobia*: the hatred for strangers (hostility).

The reading from Luke ends when Jesus points out that the broken heart of this woman turned into loving actions, for such love her sins are forgiven, and she can now go in peace. We discover that the hardened heart has no room for love and doesn't believe it needs forgiveness.

So where can the broken hearts of this world find who to trust, who will love them? Can it be with me? Can it be with you? Can it be with us? Can it be within the Church? How are we doing in destroying barriers and walls? Where are each of us in this plan of God? What do we find more difficult or what comes easy to us? How do we recognise God's action today of destroying walls and barriers? Do we pray asking for guidance and help to be part of God's plan in our world today?

We are reminded by Jesus, that the Kingdom is created following the values of God, shown to us in Jesus and affirmed in the Spirit. God has a new way of seeing life for us, are we seeing it as God sees it?

The challenge of the true church today to the society we live in is that of hospitality not of hostility. So when we sing our next hymn, let us sing it meaning each and every word – the church is like a table, a table that is round...

Amen