

PREJUDICE?

James 2: 1 - 5, 8, 14 - 17; Matt. 15: 21 - 28

An incident which occurred obviously prior to our current times of social distancing. One summer evening I was down at Harbourfront in Toronto, on the shores of Lake Ontario. There were throngs of people, many of them tourists from out of town. And in the middle of the crowd was a man panhandling, asking for money.

He started off very politely approaching individuals and saying things like "Young man, may I have a minute of your time?"

But if people ignored him he would become more persistent, sticking with them, embarrassing them and making a general nuisance of himself.

And so of course those who were singled out were getting increasingly irritated and annoyed with him.

I guess that's how the disciples felt about the woman in the story we read from Matthew's gospel this morning.

It's so easy to make judgements about people, to let people rub us up the wrong way. I don't know about you, but I find one of the most difficult things for me to do is to overcome certain prejudices towards other people.

No matter how hard we work at trying to be unbiased, most of us seem to struggle with our gut emotional feelings towards particular individuals or groups.

And we may make judgements based not on our intellect or reason but on those "feelings" which are so much harder to deal with. As we well know of course, our feelings often lead us completely astray - how often have you made up your mind about a person before getting to know them?

I learned a lesson about this a number of years ago when for quite some time in the course of a volunteer job I was doing I had telephone contact with a woman I'll call Edith. Edith had a very pronounced British accent over the phone so of course I built up a certain image of her.

You can imagine my surprise when we actually met and I discovered she was Japanese.

Now that was a harmless, rather humorous mistake to make, but think for a moment seriously about the feelings we may have towards other people.

For those who belong to groups which we perceive as "other" than ourselves - from another racial or ethnic background, people who live in poverty or on the street, people who may have a different sexual orientation.

I think it is one of the more difficult and challenging things we are called upon as Christians to do - to try and overcome our prejudices and treat people with equality.

It is seemingly almost impossible for us not to discriminate and show partiality, when our whole society does it all the time.

When inequalities are so embedded in our social system that we may take them for granted and never consciously think about them.

Sadly it's a common human tendency to treat people unequally - to base our assessments on social status, or race, or prestige or power or wealth.

Recent events have brought us face to face, and forced us to contemplate and openly discuss the structural inequalities which exist in our societies, as so many people have finally had enough and get out in the streets in lament and protest.

And of course as Christians one of the core beliefs of our faith is that we are all equally children of God. Not that the Christian church has a good track record over the centuries of putting this into practice! In fact the history of Christianity is an ongoing chronicle of our failure. Christians not only persecuting those of other faiths but even acting harshly in judgement on fellow Christians and preaching and practising exclusion rather than inclusion.

And yet - one of the strongest and most consistent threads through both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, through both Jewish law and Christian gospel, has to do with our treatment of one another.

The Creation story in Genesis upholds all humankind as made in the image of God.

Hebrew law focused both on loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself.

Both the law and wisdom literature call for the care of the poor and needy, a love of justice and mercy.

And Jesus told his followers that what we do for the most needy of our brothers and sisters, we do for him.

And yet as we look at the story from Matthew's gospel we heard this morning, we see to our astonishment that Jesus himself had to struggle with this human tendency to discriminate.

Jesus has withdrawn into foreign territory in order to take a break, to gain perhaps some much needed rest.

But even here his fame has spread and a non-Jewish woman, a Gentile by Jewish religious standards, approaches him requesting healing for her little daughter.

However Jesus initially treats her as an outsider, as one who is beyond the boundaries within which he is willing to help.

She is a woman, a foreigner, a pagan - excluded on a variety of counts.

Jesus, rather harshly it appears to us, points out to her that his mission is to his own people, his power is to meet their needs alone.

"Do you take the children's food and throw it to the dogs?"

But she immediately challenges this assumption that he has nothing left to give to so-called outsiders.

"Even the puppies under the table get the children's left-overs" she retorts.

And Jesus acknowledges the wisdom and justice of this reply as he tells her that her daughter is healed.

He reaches out beyond the human imposed religious divisions of 'clean' and 'unclean'.

He repudiates a traditional cultural and religious taboo and in doing so, also seems to grow in his own understanding.

For in the very telling of this story we can see that Jesus himself was perhaps still in the process of working out his mission.

Because after this incident he continues to heal others who are outside his cultural boundaries of ethnicity and religion.

As we read in the gospels, one of the major criticisms of Jesus from the traditional religious leaders of his society was that he did not discriminate.

They were horrified that he shared meals with the down and outs, the rejected and despised people of his day.

But although Jesus modelled in his own behaviour what God calls forth from each one of us, it has always been a most difficult thing for his followers to accept.

From the very beginnings of the early church it has been hard for Christians not to practice discrimination, however much we may talk in theory about equality.

Looking at those verses from the book of James we heard read this morning, even the first churches seemed to have great difficulty in face of the values of their society.

James cautions the group to whom he is writing.

Look at how you treat a rich person with gold rings and fine clothes who comes into the church assembly, he says.

A great fuss is made, the best seat in the house is offered, people fawn over them.

But if a poor person, not perhaps well washed or dressed arrives, it is a different matter. They may be ignored or rudely treated, certainly not made to feel welcome.

Unfortunately I don't think things have changed all that much, have they, in two thousand years!

Distinctions regarding people become so deeply ingrained in us that it is very hard to overcome it.

Not only the perils of snobbery and social status and prestige, but also regarding differences of race and ethnicity and sexual orientation.

In fact anything that differentiates someone else as "the other".

Yet James is quite harsh and explicit in his words - profession of Christian faith is incompatible with an attitude which discriminates against people, any people.

"My brothers and sisters" he says, "do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Jesus Christ? You do well if you really fulfill the ... Law - You shall love your neighbour as yourself"

And he goes on to firmly tie together profession of Christian faith with practice.

Words without deeds mean nothing - faith has no true meaning or purpose if it is not worked out through actions.

"If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them 'Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what good is that?"

What earthly use is feeling an emotion of pity and saying a few kind words, when you don't actually DO anything to help?

And he hammers it home - our professed faith and our actions, our conduct, must go in tandem, not contradict each other.

How often do we hear someone called a hypocrite because they attend church but do things in their lives which don't appear in harmony with their so-called professed Christian faith? And we do well to reflect on this in our own individual lives.

I began by saying that I find the overcoming of prejudice, the acceptance and practice of the equality of all people, one of the most difficult things I am called upon to carry out in my witness to Christian faith.

And yet if as Christians we do not do this, if the Christian church as a whole does not manifest this attitude, we might as well pack it all in right now.

Because this is the only way in which we can truly reflect the love and the mercy and the justice of God towards all of God's creation, and carry out the mission of Jesus Christ to which we have been called.

Let us pray: God of love, you sometimes challenge and speak to us in unexpected ways and through unexpected people. Work through our minds and hearts that we might be open to your voice and promptings, and alert to reach out to all those whom you call your children. May the example of Jesus Christ be the inspiration we look towards, for it is in his name we pray. Amen