

Reflection for October 6, 2024

Cultured – Inspired by Mark 10:2-16

Among many of my experiences during my sabbatical time two summers ago, was the opportunity to be bathed in tradition and culture. In Italy that meant walking through the remains of the coliseum, while imagining gladiators fighting to the death in the ring while crowds in the seats cheered. What a chilling reminder this was how such cruelty to humanity was normalized.

An excursion through what has been unearthed in ancient Pompei reveals the remains of many shops and dwellings. Artisans, bakers, butchers, barbers, brothels and even take out restaurants offered services in what were busy city streets. The streets themselves are still paved with stones. Telltale remnants clearly identify a people and an age. We were led to understand and appreciate what was a typical day in the life of a resident there, before Mount Vesuvius exploded and covered the city in ash in 79 CE. A peaceful city, totally destroyed in a matter of minutes.

The incredible history of the Roman Catholic church and its traditions prevails throughout Italy, especially in Rome and the Vatican. A history comes alive with strolls through cathedrals, and the Vatican museum. Famous names, famous places. The influence of the church, both past and present, visible on just about every corner.

My traditions and cultural background were experienced in joyful ways, but not in Italy. In Scotland, a walk up to the Duart Castle (aka the McLean Castle) on a parade to greet the present chieftain and a tour of the ancient castle itself. It is still used as a residence while restoration continues. Participation in a tug of war, in my kilt and with bare feet. (My wife is incredulous that I would do such a thing). A Whisky tasting evening. (Single Malt if you please). Witnessing a reenactment of highland clan clashes. Real fish and chips!

Ah yes, that is my history. My family traditions are traced back there.

It is not surprising that culture and traditions have influenced my family for generations. (Although I must admit I find it difficult to comprehend some of my distant relatives participating in some of the gruesome clan battles). Regardless, although a distant past, that is part of Ian Mclean's past.

It was part of the past that brought the Disciples to question Jesus in Mark's account. He was being tested to see how he would respond to traditional law, by asking him about an age-old question of divorce. In Moses' time the ancient law provided for a man to get out of a relationship he really didn't favour, simply by providing his wife with a certificate of divorce.

Deuteronomy 24:1 "Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house.

Jesus' prophetic response is a challenge. **"Because of your hardness of heart, he (Moses) wrote this commandment for you."** This was a concession to you because of your selfishness. Jesus goes on to say that a man who divorces his wife because she doesn't, please him, or because he finds her objectionable is guilty of adultery.

Jesus turns the tables around here. Just because it was customary to act in specific ways in the past doesn't mean we act the same way in the present.

Reinforcing his argument Jesus chastises the disciples for trying to prevent the children from coming to him. Like women, children we thought as less than, insignificant in society. I love Jesus' response, **"Let the children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."**

The kingdom of God belongs to such as these, any who come in innocence, any who come peacefully, any who come seeking truth and seeking love. Any who come in need.

This makes me mindful that we all, at times, need to question our cultural biases and what we have learned over the years as our traditional understanding.

When I first began working for Health Canada in the early 80's, I'm embarrassed to admit I carried with me an understanding that our First Peoples all lived in squalor, that they were mostly unemployable, that most of the alcoholics on the street were indigenous. I understood that our First Peoples were all wards of the Federal Government, and it was our duty to look after them. That's what my culture told me.

I quickly came to know how ignorant I was and how judgmental I had become. There are many social issues on Indian reserves today, but a prouder, kinder and more spiritual fed people are hard to find. I was so very proud to serve them.

As a young adult I came to understand that the unfortunate person laying on the sidewalk on the streets of Vancouver were the untouchables. The "unhoused" were alcoholics and drug addicts and they had brought the circumstances on themselves. Back then I didn't pity them. The society I was a part of treated them as outcasts.

I didn't see the pain and suffering, the physical, mental and sexual abuse that were the roots of the street experience. I didn't understand the helpless who were self-medicating or those that suffered from chronic mental illness.

I remember in my youth hearing racial slurs about Asians, Indigenous People, Muslims and others and not being phased. I remember hearing ethnic jokes and thinking they were funny.

I don't make any excuses for my bs's, but I do understand a lot of my opinions were influenced by my environment and my circumstances. I was a privileged white kid in a predominantly white neighbourhood, born to middle class parents.

Thankfully I have grown past those early influences. I confess I still have to catch myself now and then, when for some reason I lean toward making a decision or coming to a conclusion before I know all the facts. That's when I try to remember the gospel from today.

It should go without saying that women today are treated equally in every way as men. Sadly, that is not the case in every country, but it is the case here. Jesus condemned the disrespect of women in his time, and he demands we do that now.

Children are not slaves or commodities. They are God's gifts to us and to the future. They are to be welcomed, cherished, adored and protected.

And the disenfranchised, mentally ill, abused, drug dependent, street person, or member of the LGBTQ2+ community are to be held and beloved just like any other. We are to love them as we love ourselves.

Thanks for listening this morning, Amen