

Trinity 1 2016 St. Margaret's: Gals.1.1-12; Luke 7.1b-10 (Healing the centurion's slave)

Here's my one-liner summary of both of today's readings: 'Boundaries are necessary but barriers are not.'

The Apostle Paul experienced a sense of liberation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ – in Christ, he said, there are neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, Slave nor Free Person. The fixed barriers between 3 groups in the ancient world (but actually still with us) counted for nothing in the light of God's universal outreach to the whole world. We call the gospel Good News, but this news would have been shocking news to most citizens. In the light of the Gospel, barriers are there to be broken.

But the new Christian community nevertheless had to have some boundaries, some carved-out cultural space which gave identity and a sense of belonging to something ground-breaking, something which wasn't quite the same as the Judaism and Greek religions around it. Hence Paul says that what he was given was not of human origin – attachment to Christ was its own animal with its own boundaries – boundaries note, not barriers. And the boundaries had to be there to protect the Christian group from some interlopers, mentioned in today's Epistle, who had come along and wanted, as he saw it, to pervert the liberating message of barriers broken down. Boundaries give you security; barriers leave you with fear.

Then take Jesus's encounter with the centurion, a non-Jew, a Greek. On the surface the story is about healing, but deeper is Jesus's declaration 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' In other words, if you thought that only those of your own group were capable of trust in God then think again: the evidence is against it. The centurion recognises authentic authority when he sees it – he himself is a man who gives orders. Give your orders, Jesus, for my servant to be healed. Jesus is invited, not for the first time, to recognise genuine trust in one not of his group. The barrier between Us and Them was smashed through. Jesus had his boundaries – he was a Jew after all – but his boundary did not function as a barrier. In fact, quite the reverse.

Breaking barriers is like breaking taboos. Taboos represent fixed no-go areas in human life. In the last months of office President Obama has broken two of his country's long-standing taboos – that we do not talk to Cuba, which we brought to its knees through sanctions over decades, and that we do not visit Hiroshima which we incinerated in 1945. He has done both. Or take the current Pope – he recently broke a taboo by taking in some Syrian refugee families without questions and shamed the barrier-builders of Europe in the process. The Vatican has high physical walls – barriers – around it. But Pope Francis, it seems, has the knack of turning his barriers into boundaries only.

Often we are encouraged to think that barriers provide a necessary sense of security that we need as human beings for feeling safe. But I wonder if that is really the case. It is one thing to put the metal railing across the top of the stairs to stop little Jonny from tumbling down and breaking his neck; it is another to put a great wall up so as to keep out undesirables. Walls have been with us of course for centuries – China built one; the Roman Emperor Hadrian in the 2C built one to keep out the Scots; Offa, King of Mercia (the territory stretching from the Wash to the Welsh border) built a dyke from Chepstow in south to Prestatyn in the north to keep out the Welsh; we've got the separation barrier between Israel and Palestinian West Bank; there's promise of a wall to keep out the Mexicans from the United States if Mr Trump gains the White House. But walls have to come down eventually. Where were you on 9th November 1989 – the day the Berlin wall, symbol of Cold War – started to be dismantled? No-one thought it could happen. It was taboo to think so. It was a barrier and not merely a boundary. Walls and barriers solidify fear and suspicion, and human beings are not made for fear and suspicion, they are made for friendship and trust. Jesus recognised the option of trust in a centurion, an enforcer of the occupying army and therefore an enemy. But it seems that even enemy relationships can be transcended.

I have spoken about barriers in big picture political terms – what about more personal terms? My example here comes from an item in the news this week about the daughter of Desmond Tutu – Mpho Tutu. Did you see it? She is an ordained priest but has returned her license to practise her

priesthood in south Africa because she married her gay partner, and same-sex marriage is not recognised by the south African Anglican church, as with all provinces of the Anglican Church. This was much to the distress of her father, Desmond. But the barriers she transcended are more are multiple. She married a white westerner from the Netherlands (one barrier/taboo); she married someone of same gender (another barrier/taboo); she married an atheist professor (another barrier/taboo). That's 3 barriers in one go – ethnicity, gender and religion. The world's changing – barriers are coming down – it's the opposite of what we are fed by the media and may be feel intuitively. The transcending of barriers is wholly in line with the gospel message of the God who looks on the heart, the place of trust and source of hope.

Here's my final example of barriers being overcome. There is much rhetoric now in our European discussion of the threat of immigration – notice, it is always presented as a threat. It seems to me that while there is a proper discussion to be had about the scale of immigration the rhetoric has become very toxic. In other words, a proper concern for boundary has turned into improper concern based on barrier. I'm afraid that I do think that much of the commentary is veiled racism. Us vs Them. Take the comment reported in that great organ of truthfulness and integrity, the London Evening Standard: it was reported, if Sadiq Khan was elected as London's Mayor, that one politician had said, 'as a white man ... you will be a pariah in your own town. He will treat you like dirt.' The politician was immediately suspended, but what's happened that this comment could even come to the surface of our politics?

One way of coming to a better perspective is to learn from history. Here's what the Leicester City Council did in 1972 when the Ugandan President Idi Amin was busy expelling his Asian population and there was a perceived threat of immigrants coming to Leicester: they placed an advert in the Ugandan Argus which read: "In your own interests and those of your family you should accept the advice of the Uganda Resettlement Board and not come to Leicester." The advert highlighted potential crises in housing, education and Social and Health Services which the city leaders said would not cope with the influx. Do you recognise this? It was scare-mongering of course. I leave you to draw your own connections with the present. Suffice it to say that Leicester now is one of the UK's thriving multicultural and multireligious cities. Like anywhere, it is not free from problems, but they are problems facing any city in the country. One thing that Leicester boasts is that it has not succumbed to violence along cultural and religious lines. And the football team has been doing surprisingly well lately! By the way, I don't think there can be one football team in the whole country which is not multicultural.

Our current debate over Europe has reached a very low-point indeed. But it has brought into the open what is really at stake which is the issue of Us vs Them. The decision over Europe is not really about economics – no-one knows how that might pan out whether we stay in or opt out. It's about perceived identity, and the fear of difference. And my feeling is that it was ever thus.

My question this morning is: do we think we're dealing with reasonable boundaries or unreasonable barriers? Jesus was brought up short by the faith of the stranger/outsider/enemy. Are we not invited to imagine the same? When casting our votes for In or Out of Europe, will we be thinking healthy boundaries or unhealthy barriers?

Amen.