

*On the anniversary of the consecration*

Throughout this Easter season we have been thinking together about breaking down boundaries, taking away those things that separate us from one another and God. This is the great story of Easter - that in Jesus' cross and resurrection, God destroyed the greatest barrier of all - the barrier of death - and the consequence of this is that all other divisions, all other conflicts, lose their power to separate us from one another. This great breaking down of walls is the good news we have to proclaim. [reclaim, as my autocorrect interpreted my first attempt to type the word]]

Here in Coventry, we have a particular opportunity to proclaim it, [or reclaim it on behalf of the church] as we know very well, because we have inhabited the history of God breaking down barriers in the history of rebuilt relationships between us and our former enemies. The cross and resurrection tell us that no matter how terrible, how final, the situation appears, it's never the end of the story. There is a future - and that future is shared with God, and with the rest of the human family. Sixty three years ago today, that message was proclaimed here at the consecration, and it has shaped our life and ministry ever since. It's why, during this Easter season, we offer a particular opportunity to say the Lord's Prayer in German, the language of our former enemies, right at the heart of our Eucharistic celebration.

Breaking down barriers is the work of reconciliation. It means inviting people into a community which is inclusive, embracing, healing - sharing repentance and forgiveness and living in hope. And it means going out on the road, as it were, with that good news, looking to see lives changed, and communities healed of division, of the labels of 'them' and 'us'. As we know, one of our other core texts in the Cathedral, the "Father Forgive" in the Cathedral ruins, has no "them", as it leads us to stand together before the throne of grace with all of the human family. All have sinned, all are forgiven. All are invited into a shared future with one another and God.

This is what we see in the passages from Acts and John today. Both these books are about God breaking out from the boundaries of traditional religion - the first barriers to be broken down are between those who consider themselves in and those who believe themselves to be out of the worlds of faith. John returns again and again to the experience of Jesus at the hands of the traditionally religious. In his gospel, these are referred to repeatedly as simply 'the Jews' - and this, tragically, has fuelled anti-Semitism over many centuries. However the point is not at all that those opposing Jesus were Jewish - it was that they were traditionally, conservatively, religious - more bothered their own entitlement before God than offering God's blessing freely to others. Indeed, their sense of entitlement before God was reinforced by the expulsion of others from God's blessing - for if all their religious observance did not earn them a special place, why do it? They were right, everyone else was wrong.

The reading from John's gospel this morning has many lovely features. It is, ostensibly, a story about God's healing. It can lead us into a wonderful reflection on identity and sickness, and a genuine anxiety around being made well, and having to take responsibility for our lives. Jesus, it seems, knew about the man - whether miraculously or because someone told him, we don't know. I think perhaps he was simply well known to all - you know, the man that's always lying there asking for alms, for a handout. And he asks him an apparently foolish question: "Do you want to be made well?" Why would he ask that? It's about whether the man is ready to embrace the healing and new life that God can offer - because if any of us are going to be part of what God can do, we have to be willing participants, not just passive recipients. God will not do to us, but he will do with us. It's a question for all of us to face - but also, I want to say, our society. but we'll come back to that.

The man initially dodges the question. He is avoiding responsibility for his own condition. "I can't," he says - and mentions a strange superstition about the water. In some of the original manuscripts, this is explained further as the belief that an angel comes sometimes to stir the water. The world of health and unhealth is full of such magical solutions to chronic conditions - all the more so, with the internet. It can be a way of avoiding taking personal responsibility for ourselves - I know I need to be very careful here, because having a chronic condition, physiological or psychological or a combination of the two - is a terrible place to be, and the

absolute last thing that should be done is to blame someone for the very thing which has caused such suffering. Whatever the situation here in this passage, Jesus' question goes to the heart of the man - "do you want to be made well". In other places, Jesus seems to look for an act or affirmation of faith, but here he proceeds directly to a statement of healing - but one which means the man has to get up and step into his new future. Was he made well as he stood, or - as the way our passage is presented - was he made well and then realised that he could stand and walk?

Remarkable, and fascinating though all this is, it's actually not the point of the passage here in the gospel. The point of the passage is in the title offered in the NRSV, which is ...? *Jesus heals on the sabbath*. The next line, the rest of verse nine, missed out in the way the passage has been printed in today's sheet, is "Now that day was a sabbath". The reason it's been missed out is that has become the beginning of the following paragraph, which describes the reaction of the religious authorities to what Jesus has done. Not, as you might hope, a response of wonder and delight that this terrible curse under which the man had lived for thirty eight years had been lifted, but that Jesus broke the rules. v16: "Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath." The sabbath in Jewish law had been intended as a gift, a way of reminding God's people that all of life was a gift, and not to be earned - but it had become a means of excluding others from the good gifts of God. Why on earth would they do that? As a means of holding on to power and privilege - the same power and privilege which gave them the opportunity not to have to work on the sabbath? As a means of addressing their own insecurity? Jesus says, in effect, "your rules are no longer important, they are not the most important thing". I see that reflected in the opening line of the paragraph - there was a festival - we are not even told what festival it was, it wasn't important, it just meant that there would be lots of people around.

Jesus' act was both pastoral and prophetic, bringing the love of God into action in this man's life in a way which also served to illustrate the free access to God's grace for all who believed themselves excluded. Both acts of proclamation of God's love for all in today's readings happen outside the city walls, on the margins - with those who would be considered on the edge, if not outside, the heart of society. I'm fascinated by the way that Paul, having spent some days in the city of Philippi, his first ministry in what we now call Europe, went on the sabbath outside the walls where "he supposed there would be place of prayer." He sat down - he did not look down from a place of superiority, or from a place of temporary attention - he sat down, made himself at home, and engaged in conversation. Relationship thus established led to hope being born and a new community. And having spent time there, he was able to judge them, "faithful to the Lord."

If we are to be obedient to the gospel which has been opened up to us, we need to look for all possible ways to break down barriers in the service of the love of God. I've been at a conference this week about our ability as Deans and Cathedrals to speak into the public square. We were urged to be ready to bring the outside inside - bring the world into our amazing spaces, both in terms of people but also issues and ideas - but also to take the inside outside. We need to be ready to be the host but also the guest - sitting down with those outside the walls to listen to their lives, and to respond to their longings. And to say to them, and to the society which has excluded them, "Do you want to be healed?"

In the early years of this Cathedral, back in the 1960's, we were unique in creating what was called the 'Coventry experiment' - a 'laboratory of mission'. The task of the Cathedral was understood by the team leading the ministry as witnessing to what God was doing in the world, drawing the world to himself, rather than focussing on the church. In a palace of religion - which is, after all, what a Cathedral is - the job was to break down those barriers which religion so often erects. I quoted a few weeks ago a line from Barbara Brown Taylor, "If I am forced to choose between my religion and my neighbour, I have to choose my neighbour. Jesus never commanded us to love our religion." Coventry Cathedral is a place where, for sixty three years and more, lives are healed, sins are forgiven, hope is restored. And if the way we like to do religion somehow gets in the way of that, we need to recognise that we may end up being left behind in what God is doing.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*