

RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY

The Changing Face of Britain & Ireland

13 September 2009



Sermon suggestions

“Who do you say I am?”

Mark 8:29

I came across this wonderful story on National Public Radio in the United States. A man told of how he had been coming out of the post office when he encountered a blind woman at the bottom of the steps, her hand outstretched.

“Excuse me” she said, “could you help me?”

The man was irritated at being confronted with a beggar. He took some coins out of his pocket and pressed them into her hand. The blind woman smiled.

“Actually, I don’t want your money,” she said. “All I want is someone who can help me find my way into the post office.”

All our life we are fitting people into categories, right from the first moment we meet them. There is nothing wrong with this. Inevitably our experience of life teaches a certain caution, and gives us experience by which we assess people who are new to us. The problem is that this can so easily become a process of fixed judgement. We think we know who people are, even when we do not know them. We classify them as this or that sort of person, and we tell ourselves that this or that sort of person behaves in this or that sort of a way. Nothing can shake our preconceptions, and in time it can lead to prejudice, or worse.

I sometimes wonder how Jesus felt as he asked the question, “Who do people say I am?” (Mark 8.27). Did he feel anxious, did he hold his breath as he waited for their answer? He was asking the disciples whether the deeper meaning of his message had begun to resonate among the populace. When the disciples answer, they reach for the familiar categories. The disciples tell Jesus that the populace think of him as a prophet. A prophet was someone raised up by God, someone who was bold enough to speak the truth at great risk, even although the authorities hated the truth being spoken.

Now, Jesus did accept that he was a prophet (see Mark 6.4, Luke 13.33) but he was also the Messiah, or in Greek, the Christ, with a mission that was unique to his status as Son of God. He could never remain within the category of prophet without betraying his mission. So he presses on with another question to the disciples: “Who do *you* say I am?” At last the penny drops, and Peter gasps: “You are the Christ” (Mark 8.29-30).

This is a moment when the categories are broken wide open. The long-awaited and much-prophesied Messiah is here. Who he is, what he teaches, how he will live (and die) and rise again



– all of this will strain people's understanding. How could it be otherwise? For even as God reveals himself to us, he will always be beyond our grasp. God's coming among us will often challenge our conventional thinking. Peter proves this almost immediately, when he tries to steer Jesus away from a ministry of suffering. No, says Jesus, "The way you think is not God's way but man's" (Mark 8.33). Even the category of Messiah had to be viewed afresh, because he was not coming as a conquering King, as many seemed to expect. The presence of the Messiah would be more like the Suffering Servant we hear of today in Isaiah (50.5-9), who patiently endures insults.

We live in a world that is increasingly a mixed world. Mixed, that is, in terms of ethnicity, language, race, class and tribe. More and more we are having to learn how to live with people who seem different from ourselves. When we think in a human way, we think in terms of categories. We fit them into our preconceptions. But Jesus, who challenged those around him to see the calling of the Messiah in a new light, challenges us also to think in a new way about our fellow human beings. When he was asked, "Who is my neighbour?" Jesus replied not with a definition but with the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37). The one who showered compassion on the mugging victim was not one of his own people, but a Samaritan, who came from a group widely despised by Jews. The message of Jesus is a challenging one, because he goes further than saying that kindness should be shown to Samaritans. He says instead that goodness is not the monopoly of any one group, but can be found in even people that we are tempted to despise. Those who heard the parable for the first time must have been shocked. This was not the outcome that they expected.

"Who is my neighbour?"

In today's parlance, Jesus is challenging us to think outside the box. When we hear words like those from the Letter of James encouraging us to good works (James 2.14-18) we need sometimes to pause. Good works can include learning to receive as well as to give. It can mean seeing others in a new light, as people who can surprise us with what they have to offer. It was the Samaritan, and not the kith and kin of the battered and bleeding man, who offered practical help.

Churches in Britain and Ireland have had a long history of involvement in racial justice. For example CARJ (the Catholic Association for Racial Justice) has been working for 25 years in the Catholic community and beyond, helping to challenge categories, helping Christians to see others in a different way. CARJ has encouraged the creation of a richer sense of community, in which all participate and all benefit from a sense of belonging. No doubt this is sometimes an uncomfortable process.

Sometimes to understand others is something that has to be worked at, but without this, openness and trust do not develop and we are all the poorer as a result. But this also means that we are all the richer when we succeed.

Sermon/ Homily based on the Roman Catholic Lectionary readings

On this Racial Justice Sunday, the word of God has some powerful messages for us as we strive to bring awareness and change regarding the plight of many people in our communities. The readings of today draw attention to the reality of the suffering of the innocent, our responsibility to change these situations, and the sacrifice that might be called for in bringing about the desired changes.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah, in a text understood by the first Christians as reflecting the suffering of the Christ, underlines that he has offered his back to those who struck him; his cheeks to those who tore at his beards; and did not cover his face against insults and spittle; and that his only hope is in God's help. These descriptions of the situation of the 'servant of Yahweh' suit the experience of many immigrants. In quiet agony many offer their backs, cheeks and faces as they suffer racial abuse and injustice in different settings and contexts of their life experiences in this country. It is not uncommon, for example, to come across stories where immigrants relate their experiences of times when they have to accept a lower job in spite of having a higher qualification because of their skin colour; when out of prejudice they are made to be the first suspect in a crime investigation or pulled to the road side by the police on suspicion drug dealing because their car looks expensive. Although we have moved a long way from the days of 'No dogs... No blacks... No Irish...', there is still a lot to do to achieve full integration and acceptance of immigrants into the British community. But who is to do it?

**“Love your
neighbour as
yourself”**

St James, in the second reading, challenges believers about their responsibility to transform unacceptable situations. While in the first reading the prophet Isaiah highlights his hope in divine intervention, St James draws attention to the fact that this intervention happens through people. He challenges a mere wish-you-well-attitude in situations of concrete human need - without actual practical help it is useless:

“If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, ‘I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty’; without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that?” (James 2: 15-16). Similarly, it is not useful enough to wish that racial injustice should end without doing anything about it. That is why on a day like this, while we continue to create awareness about the problem, we concretely ask ourselves what we have to do as people of this country to put an end to this injustice.

Surely there are many things we can do. If you are an employer, for example, you can choose to review not just the formality of paper work but the actual practice and ways of allocating jobs in your company. If you are a manager, you can choose to start monitoring the nature of treatment immigrants working in your firm get, to guard and protect them from incidences of abuse. You can choose to review your company's policies, incorporate and strictly implement anti-racist policies to protect potential victims.

If you are an ordinary employee, you can choose to create a better atmosphere of mutual respect at your place of work, rather than allow animosity and prejudice ruin your working environment. If you are a parent, you can choose to join in the education of your own children about the need to have respect for everyone, by talking to them about this subject at home and sharing your own

convictions. However, it is important to be aware that these good initiatives will not go without challenges or difficulties, hence the Gospel message of today.

In the Gospel, Peter, after having correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah (Christ or Saviour) in response to His question “Who do you say I am”, could not come to terms with the implications of being the Messiah that Jesus was explaining. When Jesus pointed out that his mission would include suffering and death, Peter started to remonstrate with him but was rebuked by Jesus who called him ‘Satan’ (obstacle, tempter). For Peter, suffering should not be part of the package. But Jesus said anyone who wants to be his follower should renounce himself, take up his cross and follow him. This is precisely the point! To change this situation, we should renounce ourselves – our fear, our timidity, our indifference – take up our crosses and follow Jesus.

The crosses that we might meet in the effort to change a situation like this could include, for example, opposition from some die-hard racist friend who declines your invitation to a dinner party because he has learnt that even some ‘unwanted’ work colleagues are invited. It could include name calling and gossip meant to ridicule your new perspectives or sarcastic remarks such as ‘Man of political correctness’ meant to demoralise you. It could include frustrations created by efforts made to feel fruitless due to inaction by government or other institutions. The list is endless! Whatever the cross, we are called to persistence.

In a nutshell, we are challenged today by the word of God to take action in transforming unwanted human situations. As the problem of racial injustice is real and serious, the solutions too require real and serious actions. Without the willingness to confront challenges, no serious and effective actions can be taken.

