

# SUGGESTIONS FOR HOMILY/SERMON



# SUGGESTION FOR HOMILY/SERMON - 1 RACIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY 12 SEPTEMBER 2010

Most of us have had some experience of moving. Think of the first time you ever moved home, perhaps as a child with your family. Think of the time you left home as a young adult, moving away for work or for college. And some of us in the church here today have probably had even bigger moves - leaving behind our homeland, our country, sometimes through choice, and sometimes through the harsh realities of circumstances.

Migration is a reality that touches every person and every community today, whether it is migration with a capital 'M', when we are immigrants from abroad, or migration with a small 'm', when we are displaced within our own country.

In the three gospel parables today, nearly everyone is moving. The lost sheep has gone off on its own, leaving the ninety-nine to themselves, and the shepherd goes after it. The woman who finds her coin goes out to her friends and neighbours and invites them back into her own home. The younger son

leaves his father and goes off to a distant country. In each parable there is a message for us about what it means to be away from the security of our home, and what it means for us to welcome others who are unknown to us.

We are so used to hearing the parable of the lost sheep that we forget how surprising it is. Jesus says: if you lost one sheep, wouldn't you leave ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go looking for it? The natural answer, surely, is 'no'. You wouldn't risk the safety of the ninety-nine by going on a dangerous and uncertain hunt across the mountains. The lost sheep is not special, and it's certainly not worth more than the ninety-nine sheep put together.

Unless, as a shepherd, you stop to think what this sheep is going through. The anxiety of being lost, the loneliness of being separated from the sheep you know and love, the fear that you may never find any security or friendship again. It's this understanding and compassion in the heart of the shepherd that make

him realise that the lost sheep matters far more than the ones that are safe - because of the suffering it's going through.

We need to have this kind of compassion and sensitivity with all the people we meet, especially with those on the edges of our communities - in the parish, in our schools, in our neighbourhoods and places of work. Perhaps we look at someone and think 'It's just another person - I hardly know them'. But what a difference it would make if we stopped to think: Where are you from? Have you settled in here yet? What are you going through? Do you have any one to turn to? Just by asking these questions to ourselves, it would help us to be more open to others.

Our hearts will become more tender if we realise that every person we meet has a tender heart of their own. Very often we can show support to someone simply by stopping to talk to them, asking them how they are. Especially the people we don't know, the ones we are a bit nervous with because they are different from us. We don't need to be do-gooders who are always interfering in the lives of others, but reaching out with love and sensitivity to those we don't know in our communities can be one of the greatest acts of kindness for a Christian. It makes us like the Good Shepherd in the parable.

The woman who finds her lost coin is another character who acts in surprising ways. The coin, a drachma, is not a large amount of money. Would you throw a house

party and invite your neighbours in if you found a few pounds you had lost? Of course not.

The parable shows us the joy of heaven whenever someone repents of their sins. It also shows us something about God's love, which is like the extravagant love of this woman. When something good happens, even something relatively small, she can't contain herself. She needs to share it with people around her, to celebrate. She has such a big heart that she wants to include everyone in her joy. Not just her friends, the people she knows and loves, but also her neighbours - the people who just happened to be around, living nearby, or passing by.

Think of your own neighbours at home. Imagine a circle with your home at the centre that was wide enough to include the hundred people who live closest to you. The circle of your immediate neighbours. How many of these hundred people do you know? How many of them have you ever talked to? How many of them would you even recognise?

This woman's heart was big enough to include everyone who came into her orbit, by geographical chance. So many people come into orbit around our own lives, not just at home, but in all the situations of our day.

We are usually good with our friends. We give them time and attention and love; we ask them how they are. This parable is a real challenge to us because the woman includes her neighbours as well as her friends. It's

something we can do in different ways. Building bridges, stepping over barriers, even tearing them down.

The last parable in the gospel is the well-known parable of the prodigal son. You have probably heard many sermons about the younger son, or about his father, or about his older brother who stayed at home. But there is another group of people in this parable that we don't hear about very often: the local inhabitants of the foreign land where he was living, the land where the famine took place.

This is what the story says: 'He would willingly have filled his belly with the husks the pigs were eating, but no one offered him anything'.

Here is a man, a migrant, a foreigner, who is starving to death. And no one helps him. It's not because they are themselves starving and unable to help. The famine can't be that severe, because they still have pigs to eat, and plenty of food to feed the pigs. But this stranger starves. Is it because no one notices him? Or is it because they do notice him but don't care? Or are they caring people who think he somehow lies outside their responsibility? Whether it's blindness, or callousness, or detachment, the effect is the same. Someone is left to die, and he only survives by escaping from the country that could help him and going home.

The prodigal son is a beautiful parable about the mercy of God, but it's also a parable about the suffering that immigrants and strangers often endure through the indifference of the people around them. It's true that we can't be responsible for the physical needs of every person that we meet each day. But it is our responsibility as Christians to open our hearts to those around us, especially those who are isolated, those who are strangers, those from another country, those who are vulnerable in any way.

Perhaps you don't know what you should do or how you should react. Perhaps you are afraid of getting involved in a situation that is too big for you to handle. That's quite understandable. All Christ asks us to do is to take the first step, to say a few words of welcome, to ask someone how they are. And if something develops from that, then he will help us as we go along.

We are not called to deal with an abstract situation, we are called simply to meet this person. This unique person may be a lost sheep, an unknown neighbour, or someone who has a father in a distant land. And this father may be praying that someone, somewhere - you or me - would speak to his dear child and welcome him with sensitivity and compassion.

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An ancient rabbi was asked why telling stories, rather than making statements, seemed to be a more effective way of communicating with people. He thought for a while and scratched his head and then said. Oh, listen, I will tell you a story. He then went on to tell a story about a man called 'Truth' who married a woman named 'Story' and had several children, whom they named 'Myth', 'Satire', 'Action' and 'Parable.'

On this Sunday for Racial Justice it is good to be reminded that all humans long to find space to tell their story. This year we are called to listen to the stories of migrants in the background of God's story that has been retold over and over again in the Bible, in the Church, in other faiths and in society. We want to make sure that no story is left untold and unheard. We are called to build bridges not barriers. We are called to begin this process today and in the days and years to come as we build a Church and a society that are inclusive, a Church and a society that

listen to all stories, a Church and society that are true community.

What is our story today and what is the story of migration in our world today? Our story is a story of uncertainties. The story of migration has always been a story of uncertainty. We live in a world of uncertainties both in Church and society. Ours is a fragmented age. Some have called this the time when the West is experiencing the same ambivalences or contradictions felt by the rest of the world. It is the time of the *shaking of foundations*. Old certainties have gone. This was expressed so well by Mary McAleese, President of Ireland as she narrated memories of her childhood in Belfast to a group of missionaries. 'There was little space in those days for modern day concerns about cultural diversity or religious imposition. Even if there had been, no doubt we would have stared blankly in amazement. For the world I grew up in was one of very stark divisions and *utter certainties*. It was a world where on the same narrow

street, Catholics and Protestants lived side by side, yet a world apart. For my family God was male, Irish and Catholic. For my Protestant friends, God was still male – no gender bending allowed – but with *equal certainty*, they knew him to be Protestant and British.’

There is nothing as unsettling as migration – the movement of people from all corners of the earth. This is particularly worrying in times of economic crisis. There are three prominent groups of migrants. Firstly there are those who are seeking sanctuary (asylum) because of war, persecution and various forms of conflict in their home countries. The second group are the victims of climate change causing disasters that have led to their sudden or gradual displacement. The third group is mainly a result of the global economic inequalities. Thus migrants have left their countries of origin for various political, economic, social and religious reasons. They belong to a multitude of faiths or none. They have many and varied stories to tell. This situation causes uncertainties for both migrant and host populations and if we want to build bridges rather than barriers, we will need to listen to these many and varied stories.

One of the striking features in the gospel is how Jesus never ceases to tell stories. Much of his teaching emerges through storytelling. In his stories or parables Jesus invites us to enter the world of meals, dinner

parties, wedding feasts, gardening and cooking, broken families, judges, tax-collectors and daily encounters of rich, healthy, sick and poor people. It is often at the level of these very ordinary events narrated in simple stories that our salvation and happiness finds expression. Stories are often full of the unexpected and the unexplained but they help us to express our emotions and what lies deep in our hearts. They provide us with a vehicle through which to express ourselves at moments of pain and turmoil. For Jesus storytelling was not about entertaining people with harmless niceties. His parables were often subversive and they were meant to confront and challenge and to invite to conversion. Jesus was executed not because he entertained people with harmless, bedtime stories but because he told *dangerous stories* that radically challenged their exclusive understanding of God’s reign. In other words Jesus wanted a world in which all people’s stories could be taken seriously.

In the gospel reading for this Sunday (Luke 15) we have before our eyes and our ears a context of uncertainty. Jesus was not only a good story teller; he also loved to share table companionship with everyone irrespective of their status in society and religion. We have two groups surrounding Jesus. First, there are tax collectors and sinners. These are the outcasts and outraged. They are bad company according to the religious rules of the time. Then there are

Pharisees and Scribes. These are murmuring and complaining about Jesus' behaviour of eating and drinking with anyone. Unlike Jesus they pride themselves of keeping a safe distance from the outcasts. They are good at building barriers. It is in this context that Jesus tells three 'subversive' stories: the parables of 'the lost sheep', 'the lost coin' and 'the lost son'. And in all these three stories Jesus likens God to one who rejoices when what is lost is found. God is likened to a shepherd, to a woman and to a father. God *builds bridges not barriers*. God is not one who tells people to 'get lost' but one who is keen on seeking them. This is subversive teaching. It radically challenges any law, any religion, any church and any society that excludes others because of their gender, race, religion, economic status or background.

This kind of behaviour and teaching was unheard of. It was subversive and it turned things upside down. It was new but it gave the people of his time as it does for us today an invitation to share in the vision of God's reign that Jesus lived, suffered and died for. It gives us the freedom to dream and create connections, to build bridges rather than barriers.

It may be that in our world, so full of cracks, barriers and uncertainties we need a different kind of listening: listening to the stories and experiences of the 'other', the marginalised, the migrant who unsettles us and does not look or speak like us; listening to the

'eccentric' (were the prophets not often declared eccentric?), listening to secular movements of liberation, listening to people of other faiths, listening to the stories and aspirations of so many young people who have a strong sense of justice but have often been disillusioned by politicians and the institutional Church, listening to their apathy, listening to women who are often the greatest victims of exclusion caused by migration and racism and listening to the contribution of women's spirituality. Society needs to listen to the stories of migrants and people seeking sanctuary (asylum) who come with their indigenous spiritualities. Of course discernment will be necessary. There is a lot of creativity in all this and we need to listen to this creativity. But let us not be cautious of this, in such a way that we stifle the Spirit of God. We will learn to be attentive to the many voices and to the many stories being told today and to form alliances with the excluded. As Christians we will acknowledge our participation in the multiple identities of our existence. Thus the language of inclusiveness will become the point of intersection between the Church and the world, politics and religion.