

Pushing the limits

I wonder what a historian would say if you asked them what are the great turning points in the history of the world, the moments when human history took off in a new direction. I've no idea as I'm not much of a historian but in recent times you might mention 9/11, or the 2nd World War whose conclusion we celebrated last week. I doubt if many people would refer to the chapters from the Book of Acts from which we read this morning, and to a city called Caesarea, and to a Roman soldier called Cornelius, and to a former fisherman called Peter. But as Christians who read the world through the eyes of faith we would make that claim. For what is happening here is that suddenly the world is being changed as boundaries and horizons of God's people are being expanded to include Gentile, non-Jews. Suddenly the church is being transformed from being a very controversial Jewish sect into being a global phenomenon. The Holy Spirit is being poured out upon all flesh as both Jew and Gentile are being commanded to sit down at the same table. And the world will never be the same again. As that Jewish ex-fisherman and that Roman centurion sit down at the same table and eat the same food, the whole world is being reconfigured, reframed within the plans and purposes of God and without that we would not be here today for a start.

And I imagine that today this passage will be interpreted most often in terms of inclusion and exclusion. The lessons that will be drawn from it is that previously Gentiles were excluded from the people of God with their strange food laws, but now all that is done away with and membership of the people of God is now inclusive with a welcome extended to all. And sermons preached on this text will focus therefore on the dangers of prejudice and exclusion. They will emphasise how the church should have an open door to everyone, irrespective of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and so on. And we will rightly berate ourselves for our disastrous exclusion of certain people in the past, and we will be reminded of the importance of welcoming the stranger and the outcast and people who are different from us and people who may disturb us. And I for one am totally committed as a Christian to denouncing all forms of prejudice and exclusion and I know you are too.

All of which is fine, and makes for stirring sermons. The only problem is that this does not quite get to the heart what this text is about. The challenge

of this passage is rather more subtle. So what is it about? Well, to begin with, Peter's vision is about food, food considered clean and food that is considered unclean. And Peter is commanded to disregard ancient traditions about what can and cannot be eaten by a good Jew, and of course that seems evidently sensible. I mean, hang-ups about food are absurd: it all comes from the hand of God does it not? And equally absurd are hang-ups about who you share food with. There is no place for exclusion and to refuse to eat with someone is pure prejudice. The trouble is, it is not as simple as that. There is more to these ancient laws about kosher food, about what you can and cannot eat, and we need to probe what they are actually all about. So what is going on here?

Well, let me take you back to a story in the Old Testament, about a man name Daniel. Daniel was an Israelite, a member of God's special people, and he had been taken captive and he was now living in the alien, foreign surroundings of Babylon. And Daniel is doing quite well for himself. Serving in the king of Babylon's palace, he has been ear-marked for service in the royal court of Babylon. And there he is offered all the riches of the royal table. Only Daniel refuses to eat this food. As an Israelite he is committed to the dietary laws of his people. And we applaud Daniel's resolve because what is at stake here is Daniel's identity as an Israelite. Called to belong to a distinctive people with a distinctive way of life, called to hold up and to demonstrate an alternative to the death-dealing practices of Babylon, what Daniel eats becomes a crucial way of identifying who he belongs to. To have succumbed to the menu of the Babylonians would have spelt an end to his distinctiveness, an end to his identity. He would have become in effect one more Babylonian. You may know the phrase, 'you are what you eat', and for Daniel that is true. What he was as an Israelite was inseparable from what he ate. And to resist unclean food was to resist the erosion of his identity as one of God's people.

You could say, similarly, that this is what is at stake in our reading from the Book of Acts. The issue here is how you maintain your identity as a Jew, a member of God's covenant people, if you do away with diet that up until now has been one of the major things that marked you out. And how do you retain your identity as a Jew when you are sitting down with a Gentile? This is not primarily about prejudice, or exclusion. This is about identity. Peter's problem is not that he's a bigot. Peter's problem is that he is a Jew.

This, surely, brings us to the great challenge that faces us here today as Christians. Again, it's an issue of identity. We live in what is often called a post-Christian world where the church is dwindling, and practising Christians are a tiny minority. And the big question is how we maintain our distinctive identity as Christians and display to the world what it means to belong to the people of God. Like Daniel in Babylon, how do we identify who we are? And while there are many ways of answering that question I want to pursue one avenue that our passage from Acts opens us to us. And what I would suggest is that this passage presents to us a God who continually pushes the limits of love further and further, who constantly expands the boundaries of grace. This is what is happening here in this passage. Up until now the boundaries of God's people have extended as far as Israel and no further. The people of Israel are God's people, bound together by a covenant, and marked out by circumcision and dietary laws amongst other things. But God of course does not love only Israel. God loves all nations and all peoples and sooner or later therefore the limits that define God's people will be pushed. Sooner or later the boundaries will be extended because God's love is always pushing and pressing into what was once forbidden territory.

This of course is exactly what we see in Jesus' ministry. Here in the Book of Acts Peter was balking at the idea of sitting down and eating with Gentiles, compromising his identity as a Jew. Well, in Jesus' ministry we don't find him at table with Gentiles but we find something just as bad, if not worse. We find him sitting down and eating meals with the riffraff of society, the people known referred to as 'sinners' – and these were not just naughty people who occasionally broke God's Law. These were people who either because of their persistent failure to obey God's Law or because of some medical condition were no longer considered to be Israelites at all – they were beyond the pale, beyond the limits, beyond the boundaries of Israel. And Jesus afforded them honour and respect by sitting down at table with them. And this infuriated the religious authorities of his day and contributed to Jesus' crucifixion. What we see here is God pushing the limits of what was considered acceptable, or reasonable, or enough. What we see here is a widening of God's embrace into territory that was considered out of bounds! And actually this gets to the very heart of Jesus' teaching and what it means to be a Christian. Time and time again Jesus would say something like, 'in former times you have heard such-and-such said... but I say unto you...' And usually that 'but I say unto you...'

represented a pushing of the limits, an intensifying, an extending of the boundaries into a new and previously uncharted zones.

So, it's interesting that our reading from John's Gospel this morning is all about the command to love, and it includes that sublime verse, 'no-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' And I dare say that that verse was quoted last Monday at Remembrance celebrations as we recalled the courageous sacrifice of those who laid down their lives for freedom. But whenever we quote that verse in that context I am reminded of elsewhere where Jesus says, 'You have heard it said, "you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say unto you, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."' In other words, loving your neighbour is not enough. And by implication we could say that laying down your life for your friends is not enough. Loving neighbours and laying down your life for your friends is relatively straightforward and intuitive. But Christianity kicks in when we go beyond that and lay down our lives for our enemies. That's counter-intuitive. That's when the scandal starts. That's when the offense begins. And of course behind all this lies a God who pushes the limits. Behind all this lies a God who in Christ enters our world, penetrating into the furthest extremes of darkness and forsakenness in order to bring light and hope into the very deepest regions of darkness and despair.

This is where we get to the heart of discipleship. This is how the Christian life takes its bearings. This is how Christian identity is forged – as we push the limits of love and grace and what is considered reasonable and safe. Indeed, this is what forgiveness is all about. Do you remember that time when Peter asked Jesus how often we should forgive? Seven times? That seems pretty reasonable doesn't it? In fact that seems very generous – seven times I've got to forgive the same old sin, the same old slight, the same old hurt. Seven times! That's pretty stretching! And Jesus says, 'no! Push it! Push it further! Push it to ridiculous extremes – 70 times 7!' Now you're learning what it means to be a Christian! Now you're learning about Christian identity!

So, you see, this passage from Acts is about more than just exclusion and inclusion. It's about more than welcoming strangers and people the world has often excluded, important though that is. It's about a whole way of life, a mentality that is generous and counter-intuitive and that scandalises because it pushes to the limits. And I wonder this morning where you might be being called to a bit of that. I wonder where maybe you are being called to go a bit

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further, to extend the limits of grace and goodness and love and generosity. How and where are you being called to live excessively? Where am I? This is life in the Spirit! And as we learn how to live it then the world may rediscover something of our identity as Christians, something of what it means to live the life of unimaginable grace that is Christian discipleship. Amen.

O loving and gracious God,
we pray today for a generous world,
a world of the open hand and gracious heart
and where boundaries are pushed wherever there are limits
on justice and opportunity.

This coming week is Christian Aid Week when the work of that charity in bringing relief to the world's poor is profiled.

Christian Aid this year is collecting to provide cows to vulnerable women in Ethiopia, and we pray for its work and for the work of other agencies like it that combat poverty and inequality.

O God bring justice to your world we pray...

And we pray for the rulers of this world
who have power to influence the lives of many.

We pray for the European Union,
and for the government of the United Kingdom

in the aftermath of the General Election last week.

We pray for the new administration that is formed,
that it will bring about a society of opportunity
and fulfilment for all.

And we pray the same things for this country of the Netherlands
and all the countries represented here this morning...

And in this week when we have commemorated Remembrance
and Liberation Days we pray for peace in the world,
remembering the conflicts that continue to bring misery
and that produce refugees and asylum seekers and
people fleeing to find a new life.

O God, bring peace and stability and an end to such suffering...

And we remember lastly the joys and sorrows of this congregation,
Giving thanks for the safe birth this week
of Greta Estelle to Anne and Patrick,
and praying for all those who are suffering with ill health,
or recovering for treatment.

May they all know what it means to be part of a community
that rejoices with those who rejoices and that stands by those
who go through ark and difficult times...