

13 October 2019 David McMillan

Borders and Boundaries

I'm going to say the B word and hope you don't all run out of the church in disgust – Brexit. I have to say, the fact that you are all still here is a tribute to your strength of character and fortitude.

One of the crunch issues in regard to a Brexit deal is the border between NI and the Irish Republic. Like all borders it is a human creation and unfortunately one that exists because of animosity, fear and violence.

Since the 16th Century the English crown has had a presence in Ireland – a presence that was never conducive to the prosperity of the Irish Catholic community. Indeed, in the 17th Century they had the bright idea of resettling many Protestant farmers into the north east corner of the island in order to subdue the locals. An action that still has implications for today.

Of course, the Dutch have a special part to play in the history of Ireland's troubles. I refer of course to the exploits of Prince William of Orange who in 1690 defeated the Catholic King James and established the primacy of a Protestant monarchy in Ireland. William's victory over James in 1690 continues to be celebrated by the Protestant Orange Order every 12th July – the Dutch legacy is very much alive and at the heart of the ongoing struggles in Ireland.

In the early 20th Century there were several attempts to kick the British out of Ireland and in the context of threatened further violence by both Irish nationalists (mainly Catholic) and British unionists (almost exclusively Protestant) the British government drew a line across the island as a 'temporary' means of containing the situation and an attempt to keep all sides happy. It clearly hasn't been an overwhelming success!

Borders are interesting places and living there can change perspectives – sometimes broadening horizons, sometimes increasing fear. We have lived on the border in the town of Newry in Northern Ireland. We were there for 12 years in the 1980s at which time it was 95% Irish nationalist and Catholic. We came from a community in Belfast that was 95% Protestant and unionist. We had 12 good years there and our children grew up in Newry. There were some terrible incidents of violence and death in those years but we learned a lot from our Catholic friends and neighbours – it certainly broadened our horizons.

I can't imagine that people living on the borders of Syria – either in the north with Turkey or the South with Lebanon – are having such a positive experience.

Today the issue of borders in Ireland is once again at the forefront of British and European politics. It may be a line on a map, an artificial demarcation of the people of the island but it is a powerful force in the lives, identity and understanding of the people of the island of Ireland.

What, you may ask, is the connection between the healing of 10 lepers in Luke 17 and Brexit?

The answer is the significance of borders, boundaries.

As we consider this passage from Luke 17 I want to frame our reflection on the theme of borders and boundaries. Clearly there is much more to explore in the story, not least Jesus' comments to the one leper who returns to give thanks.

Faith features in the early part of the chapter when the disciples are shocked at Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and exclaim – "Lord, increase our faith" – to which Jesus points out that forgiveness is not about faith but about the choices of discipleship. On the other hand, when the leper returns to give thanks for his cleansing Jesus tells him that it is his faith that made him whole. There is a point being made in the passage of the difference between responding in obedience and responding in faith.

However, I want us to reflect on the border or boundary issues that are raised in the story.

There is:

1. The ethnic border, or boundary between Galilee and Samaria – the setting for our story
2. The religious border or boundary represented by the clean and unclean in the story

All of which speaks to us and challenges us about the boundaries with which we live and which we erect.

1. The ethnic border, the boundary between Galilee and Samaria, is the most obvious boundary in Luke 17

There was a time under Kings David and Solomon when Israel with its 12 tribes was one nation. That didn't last long and a civil war created two communities known as Israel in the North and Judah in the south.

The Assyrians came and conquered the northern community Israel and carried off many from Israel as captives and then settled captives from other countries in Israel. Through this resettlement of outsiders and intermarriage the people in what was Israel in the north became a different kind of community. The religion of the community underwent significant change as well. They held only to the first five books of the Bible and devised their own rituals and places of worship. They are the people referred to as Samaritans.

However, when the people of Judah returned from exile (at a later stage they were conquered by the Babylonians), when they returned under Cyrus of Persia, they re-established the Temple, the practice of the Sabbath, the priestly class and the Hebrew festivals. They saw themselves as truly Jewish and consequently they saw the Samaritans as heretics and it seems that there was not much love lost between the two communities.

One odd element of the whole history was that some of those who returned, who considered themselves Jews, settled not in the south near Jerusalem, but in the north, just above Samaria. They settled in the region of Galilee.

So, at Passover, Jews from Galilee would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast (this was true of Jesus and his family as Luke tells us in chapter 2) but to get there they had to either go east and follow the river Jordan to avoid Samaria as much as possible or, go through Samaria and take their chance.

Jesus appears to often choose the route through Samaria!

Luke tells us in Chapter 9:

⁵¹ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then he and his disciples went to another village.

It’s a very good illustration of the tensions that existed.

However, as far as Jesus is concerned the Samaritans are not the enemy. That should have been clear to the disciples, given their experience with Jesus very early in their time together. In John Ch.4 we have the story of the woman at the well in Sychar when, to the shock of his disciples, a whole village accepts them because of the encounter between the woman and Jesus. Rather than condemn the disciples I think we need to be aware that ethnic boundaries can be deeply rooted and the prejudice that can come with them hard to shift, even in ourselves.

So the first striking thing in this story is the fact that Jesus is once again crossing borders, crossing boundaries that made many other people uncomfortable and he does so because the Kingdom of God is not for one community alone – the good news of the Kingdom is for everyone.

This is such a simple statement, but it has big implications.

Human life in the 21st Century is as bordered and bounded as at any time in our history. There are boundaries within this city as with any modern city – no go areas because of religion, or gangs or ethnic prejudice. There are borders and boundaries which are markers of historical conflict – like Northern Ireland. There are borders and boundaries which are redrawn through aggression – Russia and Crimea, Turkey and Syria, boundary walls between the Israelis and Palestinians. There are boundaries of prejudice whether because of ethnicity, sexuality, race, ability, disability, and whether we like it or not our own identity and our view of others is shaped or influenced by some of these boundaries.

Jesus challenges us about our human, artificial boundaries. He befriended the woman from Sychar. He rebuked the disciples because of their response to the Samaritans who insulted him by refusing hospitality – which was a serious insult in their culture. He crosses the boundary into Samaria and sees 10 lepers calling him. It’s not just that he hears, he sees them, Luke is suggesting that he’s alert to them, sees the people others don’t notice anymore because they have to live outside the community.

I don't find this easy – I too am influenced by the boundaries that were part of my upbringing in Northern Ireland and those that are part of my particular church tradition. But I, we, have to challenge ourselves, as followers of Jesus, to push the boundaries, cross the borders to make the love of Christ real in the lives of others.

2. The religious border or boundary represented by the clean and unclean in the story
Lepers were a particular community of people in ancient times. In Jesus' time and place it was the role of the priests to assess whether or not someone needed to be banished because of a skin condition and declared 'unclean'. Such sufferers had to identify themselves to others as unclean and, while it had clear reference to a belief in that their condition was contagious it was also a reference to the fact that contact with them would make a person ceremonially, religiously, unclean.

Lepers may have been strangers to one another for many years but once declared unclean they were banished to the boundary of the community and they would establish leper colonies – forced to live apart from family, friends and community because of their condition.

Reduced to begging, the ten lepers, as Mark says in his gospel, lived outside in the lonely places and they observed the conventions of their condition. Luke tells us that while they approached Jesus they kept their distance, which is what was required of them.

We wouldn't treat people with leprosy in that way today in the West, not because we're better but because we know more about skin conditions of all kinds and have medication that can make a difference in the lives of leprosy sufferers. In Jesus' time the issues of clean and unclean were important and the boundaries had to be maintained for the wellbeing of society. To be clean or unclean was to be accepted or rejected, to be acceptable or unacceptable.

This is another kind of boundary that Jesus knowingly and willingly transgressed. These lepers were no threat to Jesus, they were as important to him as were his disciples. Mark tells us that such was Jesus' compassion for those judged unclean that he was very willing to break all the taboos and touch them:

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." ⁴¹ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" ⁴² Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.

It is all too easy to label others as unclean. It might be their politics, it might be their lifestyle, it might be their past or their present but, just as Jesus could 'see' the lepers and respond to them, we need to be able to see those around us as loved by God. It doesn't mean ignoring evil, turning a blind eye to wrongdoing, accepting the opinions and views of others without question – it does mean not allowing such things to be the reason we might fail to show the love of Christ. That we could have the compassion of Jesus, that would be a great thing.

But it wasn't just lepers who were judged unclean, there was the whole issue of foods and the tradition of rituals to ensure that everyone in the community kept themselves clean –

religiously pure. You could be perfectly healthy but still be considered unclean if you didn't follow the purity laws.

Leviticus is full of the religious laws of cleanliness – some for health reasons, some for ritual reasons. We know that the laws of Leviticus were greatly expanded as time went on and new traditions of ritual purity were added. In Mark 7 there is an extended passage in which some Pharisees criticise Jesus and his disciples for not following the purity laws – for eating with defiled hands. Jesus makes no apology and is hard on the Pharisees:

Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹ since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Jesus' response might seem obvious to us but to his audience it was bold, daring, dangerous – transgressing the boundaries of centuries of religious tradition.

Like the people of Jesus' day, we too get trapped behind the boundaries of religious tradition. It is very easy to make judgements about others' credibility as Christians on the basis of exteriors and centuries of religious traditions. Just as Jesus could see the lepers, the outcasts, and see past the label of unclean, we need to be able to see, to find, our brothers and sisters of whatever Christian tradition or however they choose to worship.

Dorothy and I have greatly appreciated the fellowship in this church. It has been good for us to be outside our home community and worship with, and have communion with, such a diverse community of people who continue to hold a diverse set of convictions on different issues. But, it is so easy to write off other Christians because of their theology, or lack of it: because of the songs they sing, or don't sing; because of the way they dress, their social lives, their crazy ideas and dodgy theology. But, Jesus said that it would be by our love for one another that others would know we are his disciples, so we need to be careful about reinforcing the boundaries that keep us apart.

It is somewhat ironic that the ten lepers formed a community that transcended the boundaries of the time. From the way the story ends it appears that they were an ethnically mixed group – Jesus asks where the other nine are and comments that only this Samaritan has returned to give thanks. In their poverty and common experience of being ostracised, they were able to live together in a way those who considered themselves better were not.

We are just back from holiday and had the opportunity to visit Barcelona on our trip. There's a wonderful food market in the centre of the city – most amazing displays of food. When we went out to the rear of the market we discovered an area that was mainly populated by homeless people. I was struck by two things:

- a) The contrast between what we had just seen in the market that represented bounty, plentifulness and the poverty of the people around;
- b) That this community of homeless people was made up of all kinds of ethnic groups - Catalan, Spanish and North African. It was clear that many of them knew each other,

greeted each other, talked together, some laughing together, some sharing their limited resources.

I'm sure there must be times of friction within that community of homeless but what I observed was a remarkably integrated and accepting community of people who had virtually nothing other than what was in the carrier bags or shopping trolleys.

Sometimes having plenty makes us selfish and we need to be aware of that danger, for too often Christians who share an experience of the abundance of God's grace are unable to find one another and share life together.

We have to deal with the story of the ten lepers as it is. We can't speculate on how their lives shaped up after seeing the priests but it is ironic that going to the priest and being incorporated back into their normal community created the possibility of them lapsing back into the same historic animosity that they had overcome in their tragic circumstances. Maybe they were able to transcend those traditional rivalries as a consequence of their encounter with Jesus.

The story of the ten lepers forces us to think about borders and boundaries

We are all shaped in some way by the boundaries that have shaped us. We carry different passports and we can allow the citizenship they represent to define our identity. We come from different cultures, are shaped by different traditions and histories – those traditions, those histories can become the important defining elements of our identity. There is a wide range of church and denominational backgrounds and even denominational loyalty can become our critical identity.

But, for all of us who have gathered to worship God and acknowledge Jesus as Lord and the Son of God there is a boundary we have crossed into a new identity that really defines us - though sometimes we may lose sight of it. Jesus called us to follow him and share life together in the Kingdom of God, to become a people living in the richness of God's grace – defined by that calling and shaped by that grace.

It is not a denial of where we were born, it is not a denial of family, community, culture. These things are not denied, rubbished or discarded but they no longer form the core of our identity, for that is now in Christ Jesus and his church.

Remembering that will give us the courage and strength to cross the borders and boundaries that divide people, that marginalise people and will give us the desire and the grace to find our fellow Christians.

We leave the story on a high note – because of this boundary crossing by Jesus, a foreigner, a traditional enemy is reconciled with Jesus. Because Jesus crosses the boundaries these men – who were forced to live beyond the boundary of the towns and villages they once called home – were restored to their homes and families. Because Jesus crosses the boundaries the air is filled with thanksgiving and praise...