

9 September 2018

Isaiah 35.3-10

Mark 7.24-37

On the margins

Both of our readings this morning are about people who live on the margins – those who don't really fit in to their society, their community, for whatever reason.

Isaiah 35 looks to a time when the fortunes of those on the margins will be reversed.

“Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way,
say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, do not fear.” (v 3 – 4)

“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue will shout for joy.” (vv 5-6)

The blind, the deaf, the lame and the mute were on the edges of things. They were forced to live on the margins – they were often excluded socially, economically and even spiritually. And here is a message of hope.

It will not always be so!

And in the gospel reading Jesus puts this into practice ... and how!

Jesus ventures geographically right onto the margins and so finds himself dealing with people who are right on the edge of things.

In the first story of the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter he has gone as far north and west as Tyre, right on the Mediterranean coast, in the Roman province of Syria-Phoenicia.

This is a very cosmopolitan sea port, heavily dominated by Greek and Roman culture. Although a number of Jewish people would have lived here, this was by no means part of what we might call the 'Jewish homeland'.

And actually, it seems as if Jesus went there to try to get away from things for a bit – to find some solitude and privacy.

But this strong, feisty gentile woman, who breaks all the rules of social etiquette breaks in upon Jesus' retreat and demands the he heal her daughter, who was possessed by an evil spirit.

And after a verbal sparring match with Jesus, which the woman appears to win, her daughter is healed and she herself is affirmed for her audacity and her sharp wit.

Nobody would have blinked an eye if Jesus had turned this woman away – people on the margins are easily dismissed, easily ignored.

Women just did not burst in upon men in this way ... not least a gentile, pagan woman, daring to request a favour from a Jewish rabbi and healer.

And they certainly did not dare to argue with them, as this woman argues with Jesus.

But Jesus' compassion for her and her daughter win over. His whole ministry had been about reaching out to those on the margins ... so why not go one step further?

And from one marginal outpost, Jesus makes his way to another – to the Decapolis. The Decapolis (which means the 'ten cities') is an area to the south east of the sea of Galilee, where over the past few hundred years these ten Greek cities had been founded – centres of Greek and Roman culture. Here was an area where Greek culture rather than Jewish culture dominated.

And Jesus has no obvious reason to venture here ... other than his willingness to go to places and be among people that others think of as suspect and marginal. And here, as everywhere, he comes across those who are forced to live on the margins, because of disability or misfortune.

But this man was not without friends – it was his friends who advocated his cause. We are given no indication as to the ethnicity of these people. They could have been Jewish, they could have been gentile.

And Jesus responds ... and the words of Isaiah 35 come alive for this man:

“the ears of the deaf will be unstopped,
and the mute tongue will shout for joy.”

And this man who had been cut off from those around him in so many different ways, was now able to communicate ... to be part of things ... to belong ... to engage ... brought in from the margins.

Jesus – always on the margins – always willing to come alongside the marginalised and invite them in.

And as followers of Jesus we are called to look out for those who are pushed to the edges ... those who are easily forgotten and easily ignored ...

And this morning I have an example of a reading, a sculpture and a poem that each illustrate ways in which Christians are seeking to come alongside different groups who are easily marginalised.

A reading

The reading is a re-working of Isaiah 35, that was put together through a conversation between Cheryl Lawrie (who is the Director for Spirituality, Culture and Context in the Uniting Church in Australia) and a group of inmates at Port Phillip Prison in Australia.

A group of people who are easily out of sight and out of mind, were asked to reflect upon what these words of hope might mean – what might transformation look like for these people who were often pushed to the edge?

fear, joy and longing in the prison
(Isaiah 35)

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
Life will be lived as it's meant to be lived
everyone will be valued
everyone will know they are loved.

We shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.
Strengthen the weak hands
and make firm the feeble heart,
'Be strong and do not fear!
Here is your God.
Know you have what it takes
to live through this.
Know you can find the will to get over it'.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened
The sick will be well
The elderly will be loved
The children will be safe
The prisoner will be remembered.

For waters break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert;
The justice system becomes just
Governments stop being corrupt
People in Somalia and Africa have food to eat
Those who have nowhere to go find somewhere to live.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
and on this highway
everyone will be welcome
even those who we hate
and those who hate us.
We will be welcome too.

[Together, we shall obtain joy and gladness
and sorry and sighing shall flee away.]

— written by Cheryl Lawrie, Director for Spirituality, Culture and Context
in the Uniting Church in Australia. Posted on her website [**hold this
space**]. <http://holdthisspace.org.au/>

A sculpture

Secondly we have a sculpture.

This sculpture is outside St Ann's Church in the centre of Manchester.

It is a sculpture of a homeless Jesus lying on a bench, by the Canadian artist
Timothy Schmalz.

How are we meant to know that it is Jesus? Only by the pierced feet.

Otherwise the figure is anonymous ... just one of the many homeless who have
nowhere to lay their head.

Here is a piece of art that speaks profoundly of the way in which Jesus identifies
with those on the margins.

He gives dignity to those on the margins by coming alongside, walking with
them.

Here is the Jesus who says, "As you did it to the least of these brothers and
sisters of mine, you did it to me."

And by placing this sculpture outside on the pavement, here is a church that is
daring to ask some very serious questions.

Where is Jesus? Is he in the cosy confines of the church building with the warm
friendships, the carefully crafted worship, the fine music, the solemn worship?
Or is he on the outside, alongside the poor, walking and sleeping with the
marginalized and the forgotten?

The poem

The poem that we are going to hear comes as part of a campaign by the Joint
Public Issues Team of the Baptist Union, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist

Church and the United Reformed Church, working together for justice and peace.

In a recent campaign they have been objecting to the government's hostile environment programme for asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers are often people who have been doubly marginalised. They have been marginalised in their own countries and have been forced to flee because of harassment, intimidation or persecution ... as we know only too well.

But then they find themselves marginalised here as well ... made to feel less than welcome by the policies of our government that begins with a presumption of suspicion.

And as part of that campaign Revd Lucy Berry was invited to write a poem ... which is entitled *Some Kind of Spitting*.



Some Kinds of Spitting

Tell me, which kind of hostile? He said.

The kind where they pull me over
for Driving Whilst Brown,
said a young man.

The kind they still sit apart from us
in the canteen;
and the kind they dislike I support
my grandad's island's old Olympic team.

No, said a youngish mother:
Shop-man shout loudly-loudly
to make me understand
when he know I do.
Or, walk down our street
lady still ignore me
after know my face eight years -
or, pull their children
away my children in our park.

And another man said:
That place they put you in
with planes taking off so very nearby,
that they take my belt away
in case I rather hang.

And this older woman said:
The kind where they say,
there's a nice church
you'd feel a lot more comfortable in,
just down the road.

And a young girl said:
The kind where they spit.

And some unseen person said:
Fellows, these are all some kinds of spitting.

And we agreed, and He agreed,
that that was it.

@RevLucyBerry

A reading ... a sculpture ... a poem.

Prisoners ... the homeless ... asylum seekers ...

So where are the marginal people in and around us ...

... and where is Jesus ... and how is Jesus calling us to be there ... and to offer welcome and inclusion?