

It's a small world

(Alan's sermon from Sunday 20 October)

'When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.' Leviticus 19. 33-34

Perhaps some of you will have experienced, as I have, the living hell that masquerades as 'It's a Small World'. For those unfamiliar, it's a Disneyland ride for pre-schoolers which incorporates over 300 automated and, if you ask me, ever-so-slightly sinister, marionettes dressed in traditional costume from around the world singing the world's catchiest and most annoying song. First time round it has a certain naïve charm; fourteenth time around, and that blasted tune has wormed its way deep into your skull!

Although this (fact) 'most performed song of all time' won't win any poetry prizes, it does actually have a fairly laudable message: 'There's so much that we share, that it's time we were aware. It's a small world after all.'

'It's a small world'

I wonder how many times you've found yourself saying that; usually in response to the discovery that you share a friend of a friend of a friend with a friend.

With advances in travel, communication and social media, in particular, the world as we know it is shrinking. We know more about one another than we ever have and we're realising more and more just how inter-connected we all are; that we are in truth only ever six or fewer social connections or 'degrees' away from every other human on the planet.

Recent studies prove, in fact, that we are all genetically related, some going as far as to claim that the entire human race can trace its ancestry back to just one couple. Maybe those writers of Genesis had some serious intel after all!

We are all interconnected and, yet, it feels like we're living in increasingly disconnected times. It may be a small world but it feels like we're becoming, actually, more and more small-minded; insular, parochial. Instead of growing closer as a society, we seem more divided than ever. And our politics, our media, our religion is becoming unkind by the day.

We humans have always been tribal creatures; instinctively we segregate ourselves into Us vs. Them. And I will put my hand up and confess to my own prejudice; both my conscious and unconscious bias. I judge people all the time, and although it's not something I'm proud of, and I try hard to curb it; it's always there. And I'm guessing I'm not alone here.

Some of our prejudice is caught or taught, and some is born out of our own experience and insecurity.

We're all guilty of drawing lines, creating barriers that include some and exclude others. And the lines are usually drawn around appearance, education, class, religion, ability, gender, politics, sexuality... add and delete as appropriate.

And I'm guessing we all know what it feels like to be both in with the in-crowd and out as the outcast. We all, consciously or unconsciously, exclude others; instinctively we choose to be around those who look like and talk like and act like we do. And, I imagine, we also have the bruises that come from being and feeling excluded. That experience of being left out; overlooked, outcast, almost always deepens us in one of two ways. Either it inspires a new compassion, a deeper empathy for other outcasts, or it makes us more cynical/withdrawn/cruel.

Last week, in our all-age service, we were reflecting on this story of the ten lepers, and we were trying to think ourselves into the shoes of these particular outcasts. Leprosy, as you'll know, at the time was untreatable and contagious so these ten men were forbidden human contact of any kind. Worse still, under the cruel purity system of the time, they (and various other categories of people) were considered spiritually contaminated. Now, as if that wasn't enough, it was even worse for one of them; the Samaritan, the 'foreigner'. Among this brotherhood of the excluded, this one man would have been further excluded, shunned because of age-old tribal and religious prejudice.

That culture, thank God, feels alien to us now... we've moved a long way, or have we? You see, we still stigmatise on the grounds of health - HIV for example - mental ill-health - addiction...

We were thinking together last time, in particular, about that epidemic we call loneliness; that in this increasingly small and interconnected world, more and more people feel isolated and disconnected. And we were thinking about how a church, for example, could be a place which embodies that beautiful verse from scripture, 'God puts the lonely in families'. Today, I'd like us to think a little more about those among us who live with the daily reality of prejudice.

So far, I haven't mentioned the B word. Personally, I don't care how you voted or didn't. What I do care about is the hornet's nest it seems to have kicked within communities, with families. I care that it seems to have given some the permission (as our Bishops recently pointed out in an open letter) to use language that appears to sanction hate. I care about the ease with which lies are being told and misrepresentation encouraged. I care about the levels of fear, uncertainty and marginalisation that seem to be at an all-time high. I care that there are neighbours who have made a life for themselves among us and contributed to the good of our society who now no longer feel at home among us.

‘When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.’

In those ancient words to an ancient people, God, I believe, speaks again to us today. You, I, we were all once foreigners. We are all guests wherever we call home.

I wonder if you’ve noticed that in most of his parables, Jesus chooses to make an outsider, often a foreigner, his unexpected hero. And it’s no different in this encounter with these ten men. The only one who comes back to say thank you is the Samaritan; this imagined ‘enemy’ of Jesus’ own people. He was the only one who got it; the only one to recognise Christ in their midst.

Often it is the outsider who reveals the truth at the heart of things, who surfaces what is hidden within the human heart. And often that’s uncomfortable. And sometimes that’s why we make them a scapegoat. We project our discomfort about ourselves onto them. But it needn’t be that way. Our discomfort could and should lead us to repentance; to turn around like that Samaritan and see the Christ that comes to us disguised as the foreigner, the outsider, the outcast.

We need, I think, to replace that word ‘foreigner’ – ‘neighbour’ or ‘guest’ is better; ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ more accurate.

We need to speak up against any unkindness we witness towards the ‘guest’ among us. We need to expose any lies that are told to further a cause or incite a hatred. We need to find ways and words that reassure the guest among us that they are welcome because they, too, bear the image of God; we need to treat everyone as ‘native-born’; to love the other as we love our own and, indeed, ourselves. We need to be able to look through the eyes of Christ and see Christ in both friend and stranger.

And, maybe, the first small way we can do something is to come together in solidarity on those Thursdays we've set aside to pray, to stand on the side of justice and truth and kindness. You won't be asked to pray out loud, I promise. The next one is at 7.30pm this Thursday (24 Oct) in St Andrew's chapel.

Let's end with a prayer for us all.

Go peaceful in gentleness through the violence of these days. Give freely. Show tenderness in all your ways.

Through darkness in troubled times, let holiness be your aim. Seek wisdom. Let faithfulness burn like a flame.

God speed you! God lead you and keep you wrapped around his heart! May you be known by love. Be righteous. Speak truthfully in a world of greed and lies. Show kindness. See everyone through heaven's eyes.

God hold you, enfold you, and keep your wrapped around his heart. May you be known by love.