

Sermon on Wednesday 21 October 2020

by Melanie Seward

Readings: Psalm 111 and Philipians 2:1-13

Mindset

I was captivated by recent TV programmes made by Grayson Perry. He travelled around the United States meeting individuals from both sides of the political divide (Democrat and Republican). He was asking them how they saw life in America, what needed changing and why they saw each of the presidential candidates as either having the answers or not. With the US Elections taking place on 3 November, the subject was a red-hot potato. Yet Grayson simply listened, stayed calm and asked questions. Even when the opinions were clearly barking mad, he made the effort to understand what was driving the person to hold those views.

Our picture of Jesus in the Gospels has him talking a lot, but I think that Jesus must have done a lot of listening and observing. How else did he come up with the one simple question or statement that unlocked a person's life? It seems as if he magically knows exactly what to say, but we forget that he has already given his attention fully to the person in question.

Take the account of the man who demands, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to obtain eternal life?' and gives the textbook answer himself. He lists the key commandments and claims he has kept them all, so he thinks out loud, 'What more do I need to do for God?' Calmly, Jesus answers, 'Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' The young man feels these words reach to his innermost soul (for he is very

rich) and realises that Jesus does indeed understand him (Matthew 19. 16-28; Luke 18. 18-26).

In Jerusalem, at the pool of Bethesda (where those who were blind, lame or paralysed would lay next to the pool waiting to enter the healing waters when they bubbled up), we are told that one such individual had lain there for 38 years. I wonder, was he the one that no-one helped, the one of whom people took no notice or cared about - and who, perhaps, he did not care about himself? Jesus took the trouble to talk to him (John 5. 1-15).

Jesus enters a house trying to keep a low profile but is recognised by a Syro-Phoenician woman who begs him to cure her daughter. Initially, Jesus tells her he has first come to minister to the Jews, but on listening to her he responds to her request out of compassion. He tells her: for such a reply, the demon has left your daughter. Listening for Jesus is never cursory or merely a polite endurance of another (Mark 7. 24-30).

In Samaria, Jesus sits down at a well and chooses to actively engage with a Samaritan woman who comes to the well to draw water. He asks her for a drink, talks about personal matters and reveals something of his true nature. He listens to her query: How can you talk to me, a Gentile woman (and drink from my drinking vessel). He responds with respect, lets her question him and, prodding her gently, discovers more about what makes her tick. He talks about personal things that really matter in life - the five husbands - and reveals his identity. Make a note: Jesus is willing to cross boundaries of gender, culture and religion, as well as put aside the traditions of religious observance, in order to engage at a deeper level (John 4. 1-26).

Elsewhere, Jesus insists on going to eat at the house of Zacchaeus the tax collector, considered to be corrupt and a

traitor. Jesus insists on going to his house to eat. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." But Jesus reaches out to those that come from the different parts of society, with a different set of experiences, who did - or may still - think and live differently (Luke 19. 1-10).

When it came to individuals, he seems to have been able to talk to and understand all kinds of people: Jesus associates with those considered beneath him (the man laying at the pool of Bethesda); Jesus crosses the boundaries and talks to those who were considered outside the tribe (the Samaritan woman at the well); to take on Zacchaeus, corrupt traitor, to be one of the twelve disciples; and, in Luke's Gospel, even be open to recognising the faith of a soldier of the Roman Empire - the centurion whose servant was dying (Luke 7. 1-10).

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul is talking of the mindset of Jesus as being one of humility and of our being called to be likewise. Jesus is humble because in his earthly ministry, he submits to obeying the will of God the Father. He commits to listening to that Will in prayer. This attunes him to listening to the concerns and needs of others out of love and compassion. Paul writes 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus' (2. 3-4). Whilst addressed to the Christian community, it should be a call to define all our relationships with the same mindset.



It's easy to find ourselves slipping into ways in which we define others by how they are different to ourselves - different in respect to gender or

sexuality, religion or ethnicity; different to ourselves in ability/disability, or in age, status or politics.

The example Jesus lived out for us is to engage with individuals from all walks of life and not define them by how they are different to us but interact on the basis of our common humanity as children of God. To listen with heart as well as mind and not to dismiss people or their views, then they might be open to glimpsing something of Jesus.