

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 16 | 27 SEPTEMBER 2009**

**Wandering back to St James' last night from Islington Green, among all the outdoor drinkers and early evening party-goers, and past Boris Johnson's house, I passed St John's Roman Catholic Church in Duncan Terrace.**

**Very sensibly they blow up their parish Bulletin and place it on the outside notice board and there I read the short commentary on today's readings which formed part of the front page.**

**And there he had written, as plainly as he could, how no one has the right to believe that following Jesus can only be done in one way; that – under the pretext of orthodoxy, we identify belonging Jesus with one particular denominational, social or political ethos.**

**Here I was, standing outside the largest Church in our area, a Church of the Roman Catholic tradition openly saying that – far from looking down on other churches and their members, perhaps they would be better off humbly listening to what they had to offer, and even learning something from them too.**

**For those of us who have been brought up in the last fifty years, this seemed like a very refreshing breath of fresh air. Catholics have not, traditionally been that open.**

**Of course what he went on to say was right to: just because we listen to others doesn't mean that we have to abandon what we believe; isn't our faith strong enough to cope with meeting others of a different opinion without feeling we have to give up what we hold dear? Can we not have both confidence and humility?**

**Jesus is out and about with the disciples and the fledgling disciples are finding their feet. They preach and people are converted and all seems to be going well. Until they hear someone who is not part of the apostolic band doing very much the same thing! John asks about their brand position:**

***Master, we found a man who is not one of us casting out devils in your name, but because he is not one of us I tried to stop him.***

**Jesus' response, that *anyone who is not against us is for us* is more complex than perhaps we might first think. Because in our judgmental way we tend to ask: *but if they are for us, why aren't they***

*part of our franchise, why aren't they doing things our way – and accepting our forms of discipline too?*

And this is more than just an organisational tool, it is one of pride and control; we find it difficult to accept that they are loose ends, someone roughly on track but not quite one of us. Praying with other Church leaders here on Thursday morning, at Prayers for Islington, I was very well aware that these men and women were preaching the Gospel in other parts of our community – and actually I didn't have the first clue what they were saying or where they were doing it.

But, as we stood under the figure of William Lamb, thanking God for all past benefactors and supporters – in all of our lives – this Gospel came back to me forcibly: it isn't up to us to see the bigger picture. Jesus is content to let good things happen, wherever: *No one who works miracles in my name is likely to speak evil of me.*

Take another story, the one of the scribe and the publican both praying in the Temple. What was going on there? The scribe was less concerned with God than he was distancing himself from what he believed to be the miscreant in the corner. So he lists all his religious practices in detail, to justify his position. And the publican? All he says is, *God be merciful to me, a sinner.*

Isn't that actually the prayer for all of us to use and to make our own? The tax collector hated his sin and he was there for no other purpose than to try and get rid of it. No odious comparisons, just a love of God and a realization of what he was about.

How often we find in the Gospels that Jesus heals the blind. Surely this is a pretty good metaphor for most of us, most of the time. Basil Hume wrote: *God has one over-riding desire for us, and that is union with him. How he brings that about is very often hidden from us.*

*Sometimes he gives us sufficient sight to see to the next step; quite often no more than enough power to the inner eye to pick out the person who will guide and lead us. That person is Jesus Christ. We remain weak and wounded and we go on praying for extra help and strength to keep going. The result is not dramatic but enough for us to rejoice and glorify God who has given us what we really need. It is no bad thing to remain a*

***'crock' and in need of constant help. Those who are well do not need a doctor but those who are ill.***

**We live in a competitive world and on the outside the world teaches us to appear confident and in control. *Who are these doing God's work in ways we don't approve of?!***

**Yet inside many are crying out for reassurance because, in their heart of hearts, they too are lost. And what they need from us is our vulnerability not our self-deluding confidence.**

**We all recognize that Jesus came to us in humility and peace. He wants to help us very much indeed. We need that help more than we can possibly say. Fr Howard's noticeboard says, *we here are, learning not to feel the need to compete.***

**We do not know why we are all wounded individuals, and we do not know understand many of the sadnesses and pains that we carry. But we can learn to accept his healing power, his love and his renewing spirit.**

**But the price for that is accepting others as they are too.**