

Inclusive means inclusive.**[Matthew 8: 1 – 17]**

Let me begin by recalling some words, famous words, of Charles Wesley, words which have been excised from our current hymn book. Here's what he wrote:

*Outcasts of men, to you I call,
Harlots and publicans and thieves.*

We must think now of what it would feel like to be gathered in an inclusive, a really inclusive, church. Our gospel passage will serve very well as we spell out the main features of such a community. To those "harlots and publicans and thieves," he might well have added lepers. They certainly belong to the Great Unwanted.

The leper.

He came from the ranks of those who were the lowest of the low, the most dangerous people in society; get too close to them and you might catch whatever they had; touch them and you'd had it. So keep 'em out. Keep your sons and daughters away from them. Demonise them. Dehumanise them. Take back control of your borders, your communities and neighbourhoods, your families. Health and Safety demand it.

There have been such people down the ages. And today. Refugee camps across the world are full of them. They all have horns and cleft feet. Allow them too near and they'll destroy our economy, take our jobs, infect our lives. Barbed wire fences in Hungary, leaking boats in Libya, second (or third) generations born and growing up in tented cities from Jordan and Turkey to Mozambique and Zimbabwe; they're turned into human shields in Iraq and bombed with chemical weapons in Syria. Clearly they are disposable, useless, a threat to the cause of civilisation. Leprosy may have been cured but our innate tendencies to shun, ban, exile those suffering from the modern equivalents of leprosy, are still very much alive. Listening to the politicians of our day (and NOT just the insidious Mr Farage or the egregious President Trump), you'd be forgiven for thinking they were in the same league as terrorists as a threat to our societies.

So keep 'em out. Demonise them. Sound the trumpet for the de-infestation of human society by identifying this scum and letting it perish.

But Jesus. How would he have dealt with all this? Just look at him. He not only saw the leper, he moved towards him; he not only looked him in the eye but, miracle of miracles, he touched him. Touched him. Don't tell anyone, he says, keep this one under your hat. If the bureaucrats and the bigwigs find out, you know what they'll do. See the priest. Get a certificate. But otherwise, keep mum. Just get on with your life.

I was a chaplain at the Middlesex Hospital in the 1980s, just as we were beginning to become aware of HIV/AIDS. There was fear in the land. Those suffering from the condition were treated as a danger to society. We were warned to keep our distance, to avoid direct contact, not to touch such people. The hospital opened a new ward, the first of its kind, to accommodate those suffering from AIDS. But we were still apprehensive. And then Princess Diana came along. She entered the ward, sat on a bed, took the hand of a patient, talked normally and naturally to him and, suddenly, many of us realised how stupid we'd all been, how cowardly, how driven by fear. Thus was a shibboleth swept away in the twinkling of an eye and the stretching out of a hand.

We Christians definitely need to take note of the way Jesus refused to allow social stigmatisation or conventional wisdom to get in the way of a humane response. All people are people. They must not be wished out of existence or treated like dirt. If we do that, it's ourselves we diminish.

The centurion.

Now here's a test case for Jesus. If he can pass this one, then we really ought to sit up and take notice. For this man, an officer in the Roman army, would have raised the hackles (or at least the suspicions) of any devout believer of Jesus's day. He exemplified the hateful political order under which Jews were obliged to live in this remote part of the Roman Empire.

We have friends in Guernsey (in the Channel Islands) and we've been visiting them regularly over the last 40 years. The island was occupied by the German army during the Second World War and we've met many people who lived there through that difficult period. Local people were dragooned into activities that supported the occupation. They hated it. And anyone who dared to

befriend the German soldiers could be sure of a difficult time at the hands of fellow-islanders.

Some of that same cocktail of fear and hatred would have shaken and stirred the contemporaries of Jesus. He would have been reviled for too close an association with the centurion. Indeed, the mutterings and grumblings of those drawn to the scene are faithfully reported in this incident. None of that deterred him. He knew exactly what he was doing.

The centurion should have been kept at arm's length on grounds of race as well as politics. Here was a Caucasian surrounded by Semites, someone above and beyond the reach of the Jewish law encircled by a crowd who lived their lives by it. He was a Gentile and the Jewish law made it abundantly clear that such a person should be kept at a distance— eating or socialising with him would definitely not be kosher.

Many of our visitors at Wesley's Chapel are impressed by our diversity. Just look at all our flags – 55 different national backgrounds and cultures, two dozen mother tongues other than English. We should be proud of all this. But we should also be on our guard for, whilst we have good strong national groups from some countries, we also have our minorities – small handfuls of people from, say, Angola or Pakistan or Japan. Our larger groups must be conscious of these others and ensure that they feel welcome in our midst. It's vital that smaller groups don't feel excluded by the camaraderie enjoyed by those belonging to larger ones. Jesus would always find outsiders, welcome them, bring them in to the fellowship. And so must we, in his name and for his sake.

Politics and race would have put Jesus and the centurion in different and opposing camps. So too would religion. The Roman soldier would have come from a polytheistic society with household gods, the deification of rulers, idol worship and many other things hateful to Jews. We don't know what this soldier's religious beliefs were. But we do know how Jesus treated him. He recognized in him a faith that didn't depend on religion, that went well beyond anything spelled out in rule books or temple practice. So Jesus welcomed him purely and simply on the basis of his faith.

One of the great breakthroughs in interfaith relations in recent years has been the way Moslems welcome non-Moslems to eat with them during Ramadan. The meal with which each day's fast is broken is called Iftar and it's becoming

much more noticeable how hospitable Moslems are for these meals and for the great celebrations of Eid with which Ramadan eventually ends. How wise of Moslems to attack the prejudice and hatred they've been facing by creating opportunities to eat together. The best way to anyone's heart is via his stomach.

The centurion could have been sent packing. He wasn't. Indeed, says the scripture, Jesus was amazed at his faith. So he turned to his critics and spelled out his feelings to them in the clearest possible way. "You think you're the ones on the road to the kingdom of heaven. Well think again. This man's faith puts yours to shame. Carry on with your mean-mindedness and he'll end up in heaven while you linger in outer darkness where there'll be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Some straight talk from Jesus.

Straight talk that we should all, now, take it to heart.

Peter's mother-in-law.

"Thank God I wasn't born a woman," an ancient prayer going back to the beginnings of time. In the days of Jesus (and for so much of human history since that time), women have stood on the side-lines, supporting actors at best, mere extras at worst. And here is Jesus bringing Peter's mother-in-law centre stage. He gives her the same attention he's already given to the leper and the centurion.

And this story gives us a good leaping-off point for a consideration not only of gender but also of sexual orientation. Here we have the story of a human being who was born a woman. There are many human beings born gay. Others have a genetic make-up that has them hovering between and across the spectrum of sexual identity. It's time we in the church caught up with medical opinion and society at large. It's time we recognized these matters for what they are and deal with them in the spirit of Jesus. To his eyes, as far as I can see, a human being is a human being and nothing, nothing, diminishes that basic fact. Homosexuals, heterosexuals, transgendered folk, - to you he calls, his open arms embrace you all.

We are blessed at Wesley's Chapel, and I have been blessed in every church I've served across half a century, with the presence, commitment, faith and witness of gay people. They have been and they are a blessing. It's no good just turning a blind eye to all this – we have to find a way to announce to the world

that the sufficient, sovereign, saving grace of God is as available to gay people as to anyone else.

I realise this might challenge the thinking of some of you here today but I beg you not to be frightened or horrified at what you are hearing. Especially members of our ethnic groups for whom I know this poses problems. If you force your children to live secret lives, to live in “the closet”, you are far more likely to suffer a crisis sooner rather than later than if you embrace the reality of the situation and work with your children as they work things out in their lives. As I leave my ministry here, this will be one of my abiding prayers for a congregation I love with all my heart.

And so...

The scenario I’ve been describing is truly breath-taking. Jesus is faced by fences and barriers, rules and regulations, prejudices and phobias, which separated the people of his day from one another and which still separate people from each other today. And, one after another, he knocks them down, casts them aside, makes his appeal across the breadth of humanity.

There they go, one barrier or shibboleth after another, overthrown and cast aside – class, politics, race, religion, gender and (my carefully added addition) sexual orientation.

Charles Wesley summed it up beautifully when he wrote:

*Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void;
Names and sects and parties fall,
Thou, O Christ, art all in all.*

And that, surely, is how it has to be.

God help us.

Amen.