



Homelessness Sunday
26 January 2014

Opening our Hands

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Reading: Ruth 2.2-13; 1 Corinthians 1.10-18; Matthew 15.21-28

Today, at the front of the church, you will see an image painted for us by Don Pollard for last year's annual commemoration of those who have died homeless. At that service 140 names were read out, of those who have died in the last year in this, one of the richest capital cities of the world. Don Pollard himself has known homelessness and in this image he wanted to paint two clenched fists. This sense of a clenched fist is an experience that many who feel excluded may experience from the dominant culture and all that it fences in. The clenched hand threatens. "This is mine," it says. "I protect my own, my own privilege, my property, my needs." The fists say "don't encroach on my territory. You don't belong here. What are you, a scrounger? A fraud? An illegal immigrant?" When you are on the outside, our society, and all its institutions, may feel like those clenched fists, and the rules and regulations announce why you have no entitlement or rights to share the treasure those clenched fists contain. No rights to incapacity benefit, no right to housing allowance, no opportunity to work, no chance of education, no affordable housing, no right to come inside, no power to change the rules, no way to be heard, no possibility of immigration status or a National Insurance Number that would allow you to work. How can you cope? How can you survive? For the person on the outside their own fists can become clenched too. Because when you have nothing the sense of exclusion can eat away at you and fill you with resentment.

In September of this year I requested if anyone in this congregation would like to become a volunteer for a Sunday International Group at the Connection at St Martin's. It was a simple idea to provide a time of sanctuary and hospitality for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, who find themselves destitute in and around this church and in this part of London. There was a hugely generous response, and in October when we began, 35 volunteers from our congregation had been selected, divided into groups each week. We aim each week to provide a warm welcome, hot food, showers and laundry and to get to know people who often sit or sleep around the edges of our church. It is in the scale of things and difficulties people face not much to offer. And yet both guests and hosts have been in a deep way touched by this experience. It has become a special time and place – a sign of humanity and hope. It has transformed human shapes we see around the church into the named human beings they are. One man who came from East Africa arrived full of tension you could see it in his clenched body, like a clenched fist bent over himself, ready for the rejection before he had even asked to come in. He was ready to argue; instead he was welcomed. It is no exaggeration to say in that brief space of a few hours I saw him open up, his hands and body opening up, as though the cold was thawing out and his real humanity was emerging, visibly flowering in front of us. It was wonderful to watch this transformation as he began to talk and share and smile again. It was like watching human dignity unfolding and coming out of hiding. One man told me that in his home country he was a doctor and the man standing next to him a well-known politician. "In my country," he

said, I have been physically tortured, but when you live unrecognised and treated with suspicion in this country it is mental torture.” I can believe it. I have felt it. Listen to the compassion expressed in news bulletins for those who are wounded in Syria or fleeing the violence in Southern Sudan, but when the news is of asylum seekers and refugees coming to this country you can quickly see the fists clenching. “This is ours, they will take our jobs, our housing, our culture, our security,” or such is the fear.

In our reading today we heard not the dynamics of fear and persecution although the Bible is full of it. No, today we heard the story of the stranger, the alien in the midst and the insight they bring. The story of Ruth and the story of the Canaanite woman are both stories where the outsider faces discrimination and struggle but actually becomes the bringer of new life. Ruth is certainly an outsider. She labels herself seven times a *nokriyah*, which carries the connotation not only that she is foreigner but a dangerous subversive foreigner, a word which in Proverbs is used to describe one who could lead Israelite men astray. What’s more, she was a Moabite; Moab, the arch enemy of Israel who refused to help Israelite immigrants on the way to the promised land. Ruth metaphorically represents the stranger in the midst, one who gleanes and in so doing traverses the borders, who steps over the property line into other people’s land. She is very much the outsider, who largely remains silent, a widow without a child, a foreigner, an enemy. And yet it is she who is going to be the catalyst of transformation. She is the one who chooses to remain faithful to Naomi. And she is going to prove that she, the outsider, is in fact the one who will be the life bearer and life bringer. Ruth will offer new life not only to Naomi but to Boaz and the whole community of Israel. Her son Obed will be the grandfather of King David. What we see then in Ruth is the foreigner, who crosses borders, takes risks, and who becomes an integral part of the story of salvation.

We see a similar dynamic at work in our Gospel reading. The Canaanite woman, in Mark’s Gospel called the Syro-Phoenician Woman, shows extraordinary courage and faithful love. She is a stranger, a foreigner, woman on her own, whom Jesus’ disciples find an embarrassment and want to get rid of. She comes to Jesus not for herself but because her daughter is tormented by a demon, a sign of evil and shame. This Gentile woman is the one who seeks Jesus, seems to know who he is, kneels before him, in an act of worship, and demands mercy and help. And when Jesus replies, echoing the prejudice of his people that it is not fair to take food and throw it to the dogs, she takes this insult and turns it back to her advantage. In her reply she demands inclusion for herself, her daughter, her people. They too deserve to be fed, even if it be but crumbs from the rich man’s table. And in her reply she enlarges the whole conception of God. She has the courage to break through the boundaries of prejudice. She does the unthinkable – the outsider teaches Jesus the ways of God. She expands Jesus, courageously confronting the prejudice of her age. She becomes the expression of the breadth of God’s mission which will no longer be just for the Jewish people, but for all.

So what are we seeing? In both these passages we are seeing the foreigner, the outsider, breaking through convention and defensiveness. This is not the foreigner simply adopting the culture and life style of the host. The stranger must be heard and what the stranger in our midst says changes not only their own situation but the community they have entered into. In both these stories the foreigner becomes a gift to the community. Today, as we remember homeless people especially those who are migrants from other lands, these passages point to a greater truth. That the outsider or foreigner in our midst is neither the threat to be deported, or simply the needy to be pitied and assimilated. Palmer writes: "In every encounter with every stranger we are given the chance to meet the living God. Through the stranger our view of self, the world and of God is deepened, challenged. Through the stranger we are given the chance to find ourselves. And through the stranger God finds us and offers us the gift of wholeness in the midst of our estranged lives." Is that not true also in this church? Is it indeed not the story of this church? Is it not those who sometimes sit at the edges of our church those who are in fact the ones who can show us what church is? And do not those on the inside become church by welcoming others in?

What is our response? Can we turn fists that repel and defend their own territory and fears? Can we turn those fists into open hands that are life-giving; hands that do not repel but share the gifts of God? Are we not all ultimately strangers in a foreign land seeking salvation? I invite you now to bring your own hands and transform these fists into a tree of new life. Take off the sticker and place your hand like the leaf of a tree as a sign of how we turn our defending into giving. Some of the hands have names written on them. They are names of homeless people who have died in the last year. As we create our tree of new life may we also remember them and all those longing to be included at God's table. I wonder how each one of us can become that open hand.