

Sunday 27 September: Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

‘In the Kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is King’

Readings: Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9.38-end

Steve Bell had a very striking cartoon in The Guardian this week. It had President Obama sitting in the Oval Office speaking to the nation saying: ‘He’s a blind, fat, naughty world statesman of the year’ with Brown in his super(state)man outfit turned to the ‘naughty’ corner. Of course it was in the context of Brown’s visit to New York after being given a ‘World Statesman of the Year’ accolade, before the Copenhagen Climate Change conference, the alleged ‘snubbing’ of Brown’s requests to meet one to one with Obama and the press putting the questioning of his health into the public domain.

It made me laugh, but then I started reading the huge furore in the responses (this was online) about whether this is sick – taking advantage of the gossip about whether Brown is turning blind in his good eye. Not to mention being ‘fattist.’ And probably ‘childrenist.’ And then I came across this response:

‘In the Kingdom of the blind, the one eyed man is king’

And thought ‘That’s It!’ Somehow it seemed to connect this string of apparently randomly – and very difficult - sayings Mark has thrown together. Let’s see if it does for you.

Clearly the most obvious connection is with the section about the chopping off of the parts of our body which cause us to stumble. Is Jesus commending Islamic fundamentalist states as a role model here for the Christian community? When does having one eye become an advantage?

But I think there are connections to be made too with questions of leadership and who we are following – and it’s good to see whether what Jesus models gives us clues as to how it will be a kind of leadership where all can be empowered with the spirit – just a hope in the passage we heard read from Numbers. Then in our well-spun world there are messages about brand protection and brand purity. I think there’s something in here too about how we learn to spot the real scandals.

Brand Protection

‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name’

‘But they weren’t one of us’ It’s not, you will note, that they didn’t do the deeds in Jesus name. In fact they had done the very things which Jesus had been so frustrated with his inner group for not having the faith to accomplish.

They may be people right on the edge of church, they may be people from another part(y) of it, but if they are truly connected with the same source, Jesus, and owning that, then they are not going to disavow him afterwards, are they? And if they’re not, it will soon become obvious, won’t it. It’s as if Jesus is telling the disciples to be a bit less worried about their brand protection.

The good from "outside" must be affirmed, but on the other hand we must be incredibly careful about brand purity – if there is bad on the "inside" we must cut it out.

As an unnamed professor of theology once said: "Whenever you want to draw lines in order to mark who is outside the kingdom and who is inside, always remember: Jesus is on the other side of the line! Jesus is always with the outsiders!"

Spotting the real scandals

When Jesus then goes on to talk about stumbling blocks and little ones – I don't know about you but I immediately think sexual abuse. He has just brought the little child in and said they must be like this to enter the Kingdom.

The word for stumbling block is the word to scandalise. To scandalise can be to entrap, or to cause anger and shock in society. Too often we distance the one from the other. If we look at the Church's response to child abuse, (it came structurally most obviously with the institutional response to the major issues going on there – but has been true of other parts of the church as well) often the first step has been to cover it up, allowing further entrapment, and to continue to act as if angry and shocked by the issue as a whole. Actually stopping the harming of the little ones is the first priority before the anger and shock at the scandals of the world is congruent again.

Of course 'little ones' aren't only children. They are any who are poor, marginalised, vulnerable, at risk in the body, on the edges of the body.

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So it is in this light that we need to look at these fierce words about cutting off limbs. No, I don't think it's literal, but I think that Jesus is telling us that in order to stay with him, we have to keep turning away from what causes us, and others through us, to stumble, what clouds our clear vision of the inclusion of the Kingdom. So we have to take sin seriously, and we have to turn away from it.

Both Brown and Obama connect themselves with Christian values, even if Brown stands shy of letting us know whether he's a follower himself. So both are putting themselves up for living and acting by this standard. Is criticism of the regime allowed, who takes action on it when necessary, who listens to the voices of the 'little ones' and what keeps them safe in the face of all the louder cries of the 'top guns.'

Isn't this description of hell which Jesus gets to in this picture what gets played out in totalitarian regimes – whether they are countries or churches, sometimes only too literally. The Valley of Hinnon was a place where worship had been traduced in the most appalling ways, even to the extent of child sacrifice. If some cutting off isn't done metaphorically, we end up with the silos of limbs which go with the endgame of totalitarian regimes – Nazism, Cambodia, The Lord's Army.

So sometimes to be one-eyed is good, if it means that we realise where we are damaged and what we are going to prevent it spreading.

It's like agreeing to have an operation for a cancer to be removed. That's a really mature thing to do. But such *metanoia*, such turning away from the infection of sin is never popular, because it's so important for ourselves to preserve our illusions, our images of being whole and perfect, because of our twisted view of brand purity in fact.

Brand purity

When Jesus starts talking about salt losing its saltiness it is interesting to reflect that pure sodium chloride can't lose its saltiness – it's only if it starts out as diluted, part of a solution it

can. As I have already suggested, Jesus seems here to rate brand purity very highly. What might the hallmarks of a Christian community be from this passage: Serving of the poor, encouraging the 'little ones' in faith, welcoming all who act and speak 'in Jesus name' ie being in partnership rather than competition with other Christian groups. But if there was one word we'd want to see in the list of most referenced qualities from our focus groups it would be this, 'forgiveness.' How else are we to live with our weaknesses and remain in peace with others and theirs, to work through all our conflicts. And to be able to model that to a world which so desperately needs reconciling.