

8th September 2024 – 15th Sunday after Trinity

Most if not all of us have an inbuilt bias – by that I mean that we have favourites and are often attracted to people of the same ethnic and religious background or those who share similar interests. Conversely, we are wary or even fearful of those who in some way look, speak or behave differently to us.

I recently read an article describing how the actor Richard Gere took part in an interesting social experiment. He disguised himself as a homeless person and went incognito on to the streets. No one noticed him and those who did, looked down in disgust. Only one woman stopped to kindly offer him some food. He found the experiment a profound experience and said: “We often forget to appreciate what we have and how fortunate we are. If we can help someone, we should do it without hesitation. After the experiment, the actor drove around town handing out food and money to the homeless people he met. “Their tears of gratitude were overwhelming”.

Throughout his ministry Jesus showed no favouritism as illustrated in today’s gospel narrative from Mark chapter 7 when he encountered a woman who begged him to heal her daughter who apparently had a mental health problem. Despite being a Gentile of Syrophenician origin, he did not ignore her plight, but rather, breaking the accepted etiquette engaged in dialogue and in compassion, healed her child. Likewise, on his return from Tyre he healed a deaf man with a speech impediment. In doing so he fulfilled the words of the Prophet Isaiah “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy (Isaiah 35:6).

In our epistle James tackled the problem of favouritism within the Christian community and issued a strong rebuke. He accused them of open discrimination and exposed their hypocrisy, pointing out that if any rich person dressed in fine clothes and wearing gold rings joined them, they would be given preferential treatment and allocated the best seats in the house. Whilst in contrast, a poor person in dirty clothes would be made to sit at the back or sit on the floor. Whilst this might be an accepted practice in the world, it was emphatically not the case in Christ’s kingdom, where everyone is equally loved and valued in the eyes of God and the royal law applied. This was summarised by Jesus: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39). James goes on to say that that partiality is a sin, faith without works is useless and those who fail to show mercy to others will be judged by God.

We recently sang the hymn “Let us build a house where love can dwell”. It encourages us to welcome the outcast and the stranger and the chorus

goes: "All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place. My prayer is that our churches might likewise be places where all are welcomed, where everyone is loved and valued irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, sexuality, wealth or physical appearance, because imperfect as we are, we all bare the image of God our creator.

Fr Andy Jacobson