

Luke 17:11-19 Christ Church Purley 21st Feb. 2021

How do you react to something that's exclusive?

You might think it as an interesting thing if there's an exclusive report in the newspaper. It might potentially be a positive, attractive thing if you're going to go to an exclusive resort where you have everything your own way and you don't have to be troubled with other people.

But being excluded is also a very negative thing. Exclusion can have a lot of adverse consequences for those who are excluded.

It's always pretty devastating when you find out that some social event has gone on that you've not been invited to particularly if there were a good number of your friends who were invited. It leaves you feeling left out feeling undervalued feeling not wanted.

And the word exclusion might make you think of a school context where exclusion from school is used as a way of responding to people who don't fit in or who make problems for others. But the consequences for those who are excluded are pretty severe. Here's a statistic I found: less than five percent of children who are permanently excluded from school attain what is normally considered the minimum level of academic qualification in maths and English which are considered necessary simply to get on in life.

And the current situation we're in at the moment with the ongoing pandemic restrictions have made us all very aware of being the effects of being excluded from social contact, being cut off from other people. It's really aching for some of us simply not to have had a touch or a hug or even just a pat on the arm.

For so long now simply not being able to be with physically present and close to other people - it goes against the grain, it's not what we're made for. We are social people - God wants us to be together and it's hard and it's painful when we are excluded from being together.

Exclusion is a social phenomenon and there have been two very significant movements within the last 12 months which are still ongoing now and which I'm sure we'll all be very aware of, where particular groups of people are being very clear about the fact that they feel excluded from society at large.

We've seen the Black Lives Matter movement where many people of ethnic minorities have been saying very loudly and very clearly and astutely that there are various ways in which still a society works to exclude them they do not have the same opportunities, they are not treated equally as the ethnic majority.

And within the life of the church in particular as well as in society at large many people have been saying that they feel excluded because of their experience of their own sexuality or gender identity. The Church of England is running a major project at the moment which we as a congregation will participate in later this year. It's called 'Living

in Love and Faith'. We will need to think through together how we understand and how we relate to different experiences of sexuality and gender identity. We're doing that because some people are saying that they feel excluded and that's a really significant issue which deserves to be taken very seriously

Exclusion is a social reality that we are all faced with and we see it in this bible story that we have this morning

We'll read this story probably quite differently and we'll notice different things in it depending on whether we feel excluded from a social group or whether we generally feel included.

In this story Jesus represents the majority: he's a man, he's on home ground (just about), he represents the dominant religious tradition.

He's faced with a group of ten people who have a some sort of skin disease - possibly something like leprosy - and this means that they are literally excluded from society. The laws of their religion require that they maintain a distance, that they have to warn every other people that they come across that they are diseased and they are to all extents outcasts living in their own closed community cut off from any wider social contact.

Maybe we could just get some slight glimpse of that if we've struggled to live through lockdown just in our own household. But imagine not being able to have any meaningful social contact with anyone outside our own household and of course that includes not even online - no internet in those days!

So we have someone who represents the included majority meeting 10 people who represent an excluded group. And the context is interesting it says that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem but he's on the borders, he's traveling between Galilee and Samaria.

Samaria is considered in some respects of foreign land even though it comes within the curtilage of ancient Israel as a whole. It's populated by predominantly people who are considered ethnically dubious or an ethnic minority as far as the Jews were concerned and that would include Jesus. And the Samaritans as we may have heard from other bible passages had quite a dodgy reputation.

Now the exclusion that we see here was being perpetuated on religious grounds - it was built into the laws of the Jews - it might be related to health grounds - the need to sort of contain this highly contagious skin disease - and that exclusion would probably have been taken for granted by everyone involved. It would not have been questioned, there wouldn't have been any protest about it.

In fact we see at the beginning of the story these ten people conforming to their exclusion, keeping at a distance and shouting at Jesus from a distance. They're not being rude by shouting at Jesus, rather they are doing the only thing that they can to communicate when they are conforming to what is expected of them - to maintain their exclusion.

So I wonder straight away who you identify with here in the story? Who do you gravitate towards? Do you naturally see yourself as someone who is in the mainstream, who is included, who can go about freely even if that means going to the very edges of safe territory?

Or are you someone who's experienced exclusion? Is it hard for you? Have you even so accommodated yourself to that exclusion that you even now take it for granted - you conform to what's expected of you and as it were stand at a distance?

The experiences of lockdown in the pandemic might just give us some greater insight, if we've not experienced exclusion ourselves in a generic social way, to have some sense of what it feels like for those people who do feel excluded.

So what happens next? How does Jesus respond to these people? Well he gives them an instruction which they follow and they seem to be healed. Something wonderful occurs to them. In giving them the instruction which he does (Jesus tells them to go to the temple to go to the priest and have themselves examined) is something which was within the laws of the Jews and this was the standard practice for verifying that someone had been healed.

So Jesus was telling them to do what they ought to have done if there was any suggestion that they had been healed. So it was a bold move on their part therefore to follow the instruction. There was no immediate suggestion that they were healed - Jesus didn't do anything to heal them - yet he told them to behave as if they were and to continue to conform to what was expected of them.

They did that and in doing so they somehow noticed along the way that something had happened to them. They obviously noticed a change in their skin condition or maybe they felt something internally or maybe they noticed it upon one another rather than noticing it upon themselves. What an extraordinary moment that that must have been as they stood there on the road and suddenly realized and conversed about what had happened and maybe had some sort of debate about what to do next! Did they still need to go to the temple? Did they feel that desire to conform any longer? Did they want to just go and hug the first person they could find? Who knows what they felt like at that moment!

As far as their exclusion was concerned it had virtually instantly come to an end. As I've been turning over in my mind what Jesus did for those 10 people it strikes me that in healing them he used the power of God to bring to an end the cause of that exclusion. But still Jesus did not set aside all those demands, all those expectations. He upheld convention, he upheld tradition in some ways so as far as the laws were concerned. He didn't just heal them and then say 'Okay you're healed off you go.' He healed them without telling them that he had and the first thing that he told them to do was to conform to the laws: to go to the priest and have themselves examined to verify that they were healed.

So as is the case throughout the Gospels we see Jesus upholding the religious traditions and values as far as they are recorded in the Old Testament. (He disagreed sometimes with the interpretation of them and with some of the extra rules that the Pharisees had added to the Old Testament, but on the whole he upheld the teaching that was in the Old Testament.) Yet at the same time as he was upholding the ways of God he used the power of God to overcome the social exclusion of these people. Jesus wanted them to be included. Jesus wanted them to have the same opportunities, the same status, the same quality of life, we might say, the same dignity and value as everybody else and no longer to be excluded.

So Jesus offers us a model of standing against exclusion. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God and demonstrated it in his actions. The Kingdom of God is a gracious invitation to be involved in God's purposes and God's ways, to know God and to be part of God's economy, so to speak, God's action in the world.

Jesus maintained God's sovereignty and paid due respect to God's laws but he made sure in doing so that no one was inhibited or prevented or excluded from accepting the invitation. These 10 people, quite to their surprise I'm sure, were included: they heard and received the invitation to be part of God's Kingdom, to be included in God's ways. And it was God who made that possible, it was the power of God that healed them, not something that they did, not something that they earned, not anything they deserved. But simply they responded to what they were told to do which was their way of accepting the invitation.

So I wonder how this relates to our own experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the church and in the world today? There are a few points that we might want to ponder.

The first important thing to say is that the Kingdom of God is for all: everyone receives that invitation. Luke's gospel is particularly prominent in that regard and this story is one of the examples of that. There are a number of ways in which Luke emphasizes the breadth, the universality of the invitation to the Kingdom of God. So we should take that seriously and remember of course that the world is very diverse - the world is full of lots of different people. Therefore if we take seriously the fact that the invitation is for everyone, we should expect to be with and alongside and participating with people who are really quite different from us. Diversity and difference ought to be a key characteristic of the church. If we've assumed or slipped into a way of thinking that church is for people like us, or that it ought to be sort of cosy and comfortable, we've perhaps lost sight of that sense of everyone - including all the people who are very different from us - having exactly the same invitation to participate in God's ways.

My second reflection is that there is systemic forms of exclusion in society which sadly permeate the church as well and it may be that we've got so used to that that we have started to take it for granted. We might have slipped, perhaps even unconsciously, into accepting the exclusion of certain groups or assumed a lesser ability to participate for certain groups of people. We might have done that from the point of view of being included ourselves and being in the majority or we might even be the people who are in some way excluded but that exclusion is so much part of our experience, so much part of our story, that we've kind of got so used to it we've just

ended up accepting it and conforming to it. Maybe like the ten people in this story we need to come to Jesus afresh and shout and say 'Jesus have pity on me! I don't want to carry on in the same way!'

My third reflection goes back to the situation of the pandemic and the lockdown that we've all been going through recently and we've no doubt been feeling uncomfortable. I would encourage us to try and harness that feeling: to take note of what it feels like to be cut off from other people, to have that sense of exclusion of being limited, of being unable to participate. And to recognise that for some people that is the whole of their lived experience. Therefore to honour those who dare to question the status quo, to listen to the voices of those who say 'I feel excluded' or 'I feel treated differently'. Not to find an excuse for that, not to dismiss it, not to say 'Well, that's just how you feel' but actually to realise that this is serious, this is real, that it takes a great deal of courage even to say that. And to see that what lies behind it is genuine, is real and is painful. So maybe there is something good and fruitful that can come from the experience of lockdown, which is that we will be much more alert and much more sensitive to the realities and the effects of social exclusion. Maybe through our response to that - through our prayers, through our openness - we can be genuinely part of using the power of God, the goodness of God to make sure the invitation is genuinely extended to everyone, that everyone has an equal place at God's table and an equal role in God's purposes.

As I finish, we need to say something about gratitude. The telling of this bible story very often focuses on the fact that of these 10 people who were healed, who were allowed to be included, one and only one came back and said thank you and gave glory to God by thanking Jesus. When he did so Jesus slightly rudely (it might seem) pointed out that he's a foreigner: he's a Samaritan. Not only was he someone who had leprosy and was excluded for that reason but he was a Samaritan so was looked down upon religiously and who was looked down upon ethnically by many of the Jews at the time. Yet Jesus affirms him and welcomes him and holds him up as a model. By pointing out the status of this person Jesus is quite gently but directly challenging and perhaps rebuking all those people who do not express their gratitude for the invitation they receive and especially those who take it for granted, especially those who kind of feel that they're included automatically, that they have a right to be involved to be part of God's Kingdom.

That's the contrast which Jesus points up and in holding before us the image of this outcast - this ethnic minority person who was 'wrong' in his religious thinking by most accounts, and was cut off from society because of a physical condition - in pointing out and holding up this person and making him an example of gratitude Jesus is challenging all of us: Do we really get it? Have we really understood? Have we really taken to heart the depth of the welcome and the embrace and the opportunity that God has given us in allowing us to be part of God's Kingdom, which is open to all people equally. There is to be no exclusion.

The opportunity that gives us is to be more thankful and to express that: to bring to mind that truth and to be grateful for what God has done for us. A reason for giving thanks (amongst others, I think) is that the more grateful we are, and the more we

express our gratitude to God, then the more likely we will be instinctively to welcome others: to embrace them, to work for their inclusion and to make sure that no one is excluded from God's ways.

So let's do that let's seek to be thankful, let's seek to recognize that we have been graciously invited, and let's look for every opportunity to involve and include others.

Thanks be to God.