

Changing Perspective

Every week we read the article in the Times by Melanie Reid. She had a bad riding accident three years ago and now has to use a wheelchair. One week she described how hard it is always being at this low level, always looking up at people, never able to have a face to face talk with someone standing.

Imagine how it must have been for the woman in today's gospel reading - bent over all the time - perhaps spending most of her days looking at the ground. Last Sunday at the 11.15 service I think Keith had some children come to the front and try this - try different ways of limiting their viewpoint.

He did this not just to think about the woman's situation - because in the story she is not the only one who's perspective and vision is all wrong. Who else is in the same situation? The leader of the synagogue. It's not because of a physical disability, but because of his way of thinking. He thinks that keeping the Sabbath is more important than setting someone free from illness. He is seeing things all wrong - like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Like a lot of very religious people in his day, he has focussed on the wrong rules - Jesus says that they are like someone who has strained a gnat out of their cup, but swallowed a camel. It made him really angry.

Do you think we ever do the same thing, in our church today? At Greenbelt I went to hear someone called Mark Oakley, who's a Canon at St. Paul's cathedral. He began by telling us about his heart surgery - but like in this story, it wasn't just physical healing - it was also a different sort of healing of the heart.

He hadn't come to speak about his operation. He had come to speak about gay marriage. His change of heart was about speaking out. He told us something he had never said in this sort of public gathering before - he told us he was gay.

He described his experience of working in the church - having to keep his sexuality hidden - having nods & winks from bishops - but don't make a thing of it. he talked about learning to wear a mask, until the mask became something he couldn't take off - learning to hate himself a little more with each pretence.

He now believed that we as a church have got it wrong - just as we have got it wrong so often before - with slaves, with people of other races, with women, with divorced people. He said that the church can be very good at being mean about small things, when we should be being generous about large things.

It reminds me of what Isaiah says in our first reading - God's people should remove 'the pointing of the finger'. It reminds me what Jesus says - we should take the log out of our own eye before we try to find the speck in our neighbour's.

Our gospel reading could be summed up by Jesus' words: the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath. When it came to gay marriage what Mark Oakley said was this: marriage is made for man, not man for marriage. he believes that allowing gay as well as straight people to marry will actually strengthen marriage. If two people want to share their life, to commit themselves to each other before God, to live in love with one another - isn't that something we should be honouring? Doesn't that fit with the underlying meaning of marriage?

Well, you may or may not agree. But I think we need to talk about it. And whether it's with this or with any other issue, we don't want to become like the leader of the synagogue in this story. We don't want to get everything out of perspective so that our rules are more important than God's grace.

That means that we will need God to keep correcting our perspective, and healing our vision. We are all still beginners when it comes to love, as the song said. God longs to heal us, to open us up, to see how wide and gracious his love is. During communion I'm going to play a song called 'God of the moon and stars'. Paul Field, who wrote it, was at the time struggling with feelings of anger and the desire to judge someone else. But as he thought about this, he came to understand that 'the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind' - it's a love which includes all sorts of people, far more widely than we might think. And if this is what God's love is like for others, that also tells us something about God's love for us, in all its generosity and grace. Thanks be to God.