

## NATURAL OR CULTURAL

**PREACHER : The Revd Rob Ryan, Cathedral Curate**

Sunday, September 6<sup>th</sup> 2009

**Trinity 13**

Mark 7:24-37, James 2:1-17 I

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

---

A drunk man who smelled like beer sat down on the underground next to a priest. The man's tie was stained, his face was plastered with red lipstick, and a half-empty bottle of gin was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened his newspaper and began reading. After a few minutes the man turned to the priest and asked, "Say Father, what causes arthritis?"

The priest replied, "My Son, it's caused by loose living, being with cheap women, too much alcohol, contempt for your fellow man, sleeping around with prostitutes and lack of a bath."

The drunk muttered in response, "Well, I'll be darned," Then returned to his paper.

The priest, thinking about what he had said, nudged the man and apologised. "I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?"

The drunk answered, "I don't have it, Father. I was just reading here that the Pope does."

Judging others.

We know it is something we should not do.

And yet .... it seems almost natural.

I watched X factor the other week. My children really get into it but they tell me they prefer the early stages of the programme because that is when you see all the embarrassing acts that people like to laugh at. My children like to laugh at these poor people who clearly cannot sing or dance - a mark of poor parenting!

I particularly watched this time because I was intrigued to know whether the judges, Simon, Louis, Cheryl and Daniil would be different due to last year. A different show, in Britain's Got Talent, but the same head judge and a show the others are aware of. The year of Susan Boyle, an older, shy not very attractive and ever so slightly eccentric Scottish woman. She did not look the part. Before she sang the judges were visibly smiling if not laughing. It was very cruel. The smiles fell from their faces as this woman opened her mouth and a wonderful voice sang for them. She eventually got to the final.

I wondered whether this year Simon would act differently due to that experience. The first act on the TV was a young girl from Dagenham called Stacey. She spoke with a strong Essex accent in her interview and there was a visible smirk on Simon's face when Stacey said "I'm going to sing what a wonderful world". The smirk changed to looks of amazement as this 19 year old girl sang beautifully.

'I don't know why I had a preconceived idea' says Cheryl, 'but I didn't expect you to be that good' Simon ended the comments with 'that performance completely took me by surprise. You really are very very good!'

Judging others.

We know it is something we should not do.

And yet ... it seems almost natural.

We listen to our gospel reading this morning and we are struck by the attitude of Jesus. However we look at these words of Jesus ... they are quite shocking. Is he really telling this woman that because she is not a Jew that he cannot help her? Is he judging here according to appearance and race? Are we looking at a racist incident here?

Some theologians have tried to butter up this passage by saying Jesus did not really mean dog, but instead was using the cuter term of puppy to denote people who just needed more guidance. There are even artists who have interpreted this story with the woman holding a cute puppy in her arms. I would love to have been there to see the look on Jesus' face and hear the tone of his voice. But the word Jesus uses is dog and it is the way 1st century Jews spoke about the gentiles - as far as they were concerned all gentiles were dogs! Jesus is in Tyre and Josephus a 1st century Jewish historian describes the inhabitants of Tyre as: 'notoriously our bitter enemies.' No mincing of the words there then!

Judging others.

We know it is something we should not do.

And yet ... it seems almost natural.

Maybe not natural .... but what about cultural?

Jesus was brought up as a first century Jew. He grew up listening to the stories of the Passover, the escape from slavery, the miracles of the prophets but most of all he will have heard over and over and over again that the Jews were the chosen people, God's own people. He was brought up to believe, along with other 1st century Jews, that as they were God's chosen people then it followed that they were superior to everyone else.

I believe Jesus' initial reaction to reject this woman's request is as a result of his cultural upbringing.

If this is the case then the reaction of Jesus himself seems to grate badly with the words we heard read from the letter of James this morning which ask 'can you really claim faith in Jesus with your acts of favouritism?'

The words of James seem to make a lot of sense to us today; clearly as Christians we understand prejudice to be wrong. But what we often miss is that James is being very radical here because prejudice is at the heart of 1st century Jewish culture. The Jews were the chosen ones, they were the elect, they were better than everyone else and so were required to keep their distance from those who were not Jewish so that they could worship their God in purity. They did not just have favourites, they were the favourites!

Now ... this was rooted in good reason.

To worship God, to come before the creator of the universe it was clearly right to be properly prepared, or clean. If you were going to meet the monarch you would put your best suit or dress on. If you are going to meet the King of the whole universe you would want to ensure that you looked, felt and smelt your best in front of the Almighty.

But ... they had allowed their personal requirement to be acceptable before God to bleed into a judgemental requirement on others. God's rules in the Old Testament were to help people prepare themselves and not for them to use to judge the acceptability, or not, of others. Rather than using the laws of God to examine themselves, they turned to the easier task of looking at others.

As I consider the words of James, I can't help but ask myself questions.

Do I have favourites?

Do I prefer the company of some people over others?

Are there people I avoid?

When I look at people do I have preconceived ideas and make judgements?

I am shocked to say that the answer is yes!

On realising that I tried to console myself by thinking actually it is fairly natural to experience antipathy towards some, especially strangers. Then I wondered if I wasn't just making excuses for my own prejudice. Our cultural pull is strong and it is not too unlike that culture of 1st century Judaism - its a culture that says 'don't get involved, avoid those you don't know, don't be defiled, after all, what will others think if they see you with them?'

I then realised something afresh when I re-read the gospel ... Jesus understands our reaction. Jesus understands because he experienced this himself, right here in this gospel with this woman. He experienced initial antipathy towards the outsider.

Why? Due to the culture he had been brought up in. The cultural norm was to ignore and belittle the pleas of this woman, an enemy of Israel. And yet .... here, as with other incidences (the tax collector, the woman at the well, the person with leprosy), Jesus chooses to stand against the prevailing culture of judgement and bias.

Jesus experienced what we experienced and shows us what to do.

In my daily travels in Rochester I see cultural norms that need challenging:

- people walking past Marcella who sells the Big Issue on the High Street
- the pushing past people to be first in queues
- the traffic jams around the road works as people refuse to give way
- the rudeness to staff in shops and workplaces

We can choose to entertain and allow our first reactions to take hold, or we can stand with Jesus against culture. Some ways might be to

- sit with Marcella for a minute or two and buy a Big Issue
- stop to chat with that person rather than walk past them again
- return your cup or glass to the counter with a 'thank you' for the staff
- give way, or pull over, and allow others to go before us

This is what we mean when we talk of transformative faith in Jesus Christ. A faith that not only transforms us but transforms for better the life of others.

As you consider your response listen to that word of Jesus 'ephphatha' (ef'-a-tha) and ask what it is you need to be opened to.