

Chrétiens sans frontières

Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 2 September 2018

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1: 17-27; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-23

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

We live at a time of enhanced border protection—unless you're a young French or Italian *au pair* of course¹ (Ooh la la)! So many nations are building walls, to keep the problems out. Yet as Wendy Brown argues in her book *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, the building of these walls is actually a symptom of the nation state in decline. The more nervous and conflicted we are internally, the more we project our problems outwards. And this mentality carries over into religion, whenever religion serves its age-old ideological function shoring up an in-group at the expense of an out group. Yet Jesus doesn't let us Christians off the hook that easily, as we see in today's Gospel.

¹ The Minister for Home Affairs, Peter Dutton—a hard man on border protection—has admitted some young women against the advice of his department to work as nannies, the suggestion being that he has done favours for friends and party donors.

In this Gospel episode nationalism and religion are woven fine. We see that the gatekeepers—the Pharisees—are scandalised by the more inclusive, more loose-limbed style of Jesus and his disciples. They're too gentile-friendly when it comes to eating, which Jesus' religious critics regard as a highly ritualised social undertaking ringed about with prohibitions. In fact, not far ahead of us in Mark's Gospel we see Jesus going completely overboard with the miraculous feeding of a whole Gentile crowd—just like he fed a large Jewish crowd earlier on.

Jesus uses meals as an invitation, not a barrier, as we remember here at the altar when all who come seeking to be fed with Jesus' life and to join his movement are welcome. As the American Episcopalian theologian Luke Bretherton reminds us, in his book *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, borders don't have to be barriers; rather, they can be more like faces, conveying a welcoming sense of who we are to outsiders. So, with Jesus' countercultural and seemingly irreligious habits in mind, I find myself asking whether the uniforms of Australia's new Border Force had to be black, and if we had to call it that?

But Jesus' alternative isn't to give up on ritual or on maintaining convictions. In Mark's Gospel, just before today's passage, and setting the scene for it, we see Jesus walking on the lake in a storm—

mastering the chaos of history and violence just like his heavenly Father did in the Genesis story of creation. With this in mind, I read today's Gospel passage as a reassurance that we don't have to master the chaos by violence and exclusion. This is because it's God who creates the world, just as God calls us in Christ to inhabit a new world that we don't have to secure by force. This is the peace of God that passes all understanding in which we leave this place every Sunday, in place of the fragile peace that we understand all too well: a peace won through self-deception, and at the expense of unwelcome outsiders.

The other mistake we see named in today's Gospel is locating the cause of our problems entirely outside ourselves—*we're* not the problem, it's the asylum seeking queue jumpers, the same sex oriented, the Sydney Evangelicals, or whoever else we feel we need to exclude in order to feel better about ourselves. But Jesus sets us right about all that in today's gospel, giving us some theological toilet training. Jesus teaches us today that the contamination doesn't come from outside—we can process external challenges and move on in life, just like we process every kind of food through our bodies, keeping what's good, expelling what's not, and moving on. Instead, Jesus tells us that the contamination comes from inside. He lists all the evil things that come from the human heart, which means of

course that *we're* the locus of the problem, that *we're* the cause of the threat—and that *we* bear the responsibility. The enemy is within.

Now, how do we deal with this problem? How do we address the real threat of human wickedness without obsessively building walls against it, but facing it instead where it actually lives: *in here*—in me, in you, among us? All our readings today deal with this question.

There's a lot of talk about good behaviour in these readings, about keeping the commandments, about doing the right thing, and it'd be easy for us to miss the crucial point—it'd be easy for us to slip down the well-trodden path of reducing Christianity to ethics, to rules for living, like they do in Anglican schools with their "religion and values education" programs.

But the living heart of the gospel isn't reducible to ethics, to good behaviour. Rather, it's about who Jesus is and what Jesus has already done for us. James in the Epistle today starts his ethical exhortation by talking about a gift to us from above, coming down from the Father of lights in Jesus Christ, who fulfils God's own purposes for us, so we in turn can fulfil them. Friends, James teaches us today that the Christian ethical life is about bearing fruit: but it's a fruit that's already been planted and grown in us by God in Christ, who gave us birth in our baptism by the word of truth. So, as Karl Barth said, the Christian life is *Gabe und Aufgabe*, "gift and task"—not just task, but

a gift that enables and empowers the task, bearing fruit in us through a life of gift exchange, a life oriented towards others in peace. So we Christians are more like confident border crossing ambassadors and traders, and less like suspicious reclusive hoarders and bigots. This is the sort of religion James advocates, in complete harmony with Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees in today's Gospel.

James goes on from the gift to the task, inviting us to take our new ethical life in Jesus out for a test drive. If we really give it full throttle, we'll surprise ourselves and surprise others; we won't just be talking about going fast, we'll actually be doing it. And by embracing that challenge we'll find out who we really are—when we look in the mirror, as James reassures us, we'll see someone who we recognise, and thereafter we'll never forget who we are.

Now, the point of all this isn't about being in the right or about looking good. The point of living the Christian ethical life isn't to impress God, like in the bumper sticker which says "Jesus is coming—look busy!" Rather, according to that legalistic-seeming Old Testament book, Deuteronomy, from which we also hear today, the point of keeping the commandments is to be a witness in the world to what God's like, and to show what the people of God are like. The aim here is humanistic not legalistic! God's gift, God's liberating actions for Israel, are meant for a light to the nations. Israel is meant

to look across its borders to its new neighbouring nations and to show them the goodness of Israel's God. I know that a lot of Old Testament war stories fall well short of this spiritually mature insight, but those war stories serve to mark the Bible's path towards a truer, more inclusive vision of God, beyond the narrowness and fearfulness that Jesus confronts in today's gospel.

Friends, *this* is what holiness means. This is what you find in the tabernacle of the Temple and on the Holy Hill of Jerusalem according our Psalm today: not a rigorous religious state obsessed with its borders, but the self-sacrificing, risk-taking figure of Jesus Christ who enlists us in a different type of religion, and a richer version of ethics.

Let me end with a little story from the news this past week that shows all this at work. Whether or not the two men involved were Christians or not, they'd certainly got the message, and thank God for their witness to our nation on the TV news. When that asylum seeker boat ran aground in far North Queensland, and two of the 17 Vietnamese passengers initially evaded capture, it turned out that they'd been picked up by two fishermen on the Daintree River. These knockabout North Queenslanders made the asylum seekers welcome on their boat, they let them help with the crab pots—perhaps they'd been fishermen back in Vietnam—and they explained gently, as best they could, about what had to happen next. They took smiling selfies

with the asylum seekers, and bid them a fond farewell as they delivered them to a Border Force contingent that was combing the Daintree. Everything in today's readings was there: the graciousness, the non-anxious openness to the other, the compassionate commitment to doing the right thing, and it all showed those two asylum seekers that we're not a bad lot, we Australians. In light of today's readings, and the Eucharist we celebrate, may you and I come to share in the same gracious spirit: confident, proud, compassionate, non-anxious, and outward looking. May we become more of what Jesus frees us and calls us to be: *Chrétiens sans frontières*—Christians without borders.

The Lord be with you ...