

Along the track

Tolerance

When I was young sectarianism was pretty rife. It started at an early age. As Catholic kids we were often subjected to this little ditty – “Catholic dogs sitting on logs, eating maggots out of frogs.” Mind you, we had ditties of our own about the proddies too. There was a suspicion about Catholics, about their beliefs and customs and especially their politics. We were ‘Papists’. Earlier last century Catholics, especially Irish Catholics were seen as a threat to the established ‘way of life’. Their loyalty to “the Crown” was questioned. In some places, people even tried to stop Catholic schools or churches being built in their area. Until the 1970s, Catholic schools received no government funding and when that funding was granted, it was subjected to a High Court challenge. I still recall that many ads for employment contained the words “Catholics need not apply”. That would be unlawful now but are we a more tolerant nation now, I wonder?

Would you consider yourself to be a tolerant person? Being ‘tolerant’ is not a word that appeals to me much. It smacks a bit of condescension – better than the alternative I suppose but surely something more than tolerance of others’ ways, others’ beliefs, others’ customs is required of those who follow the ways of Jesus?

Jesus’ interactions with other people, his treatment of others can be quite surprising at times. He could be quite scathing of the motives of those who came to trick him, scathing of those who, in the name of religion, imposed laws and burdens on others but not on themselves, those who made an appearance of their faith, rather than it being a life-changing reality, scathing of their intolerance and their inability to see the world as God sees it. Do you remember what he called some of those Scribes and Pharisees who came to trick him: *You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?* (Mt 23:33). He called Herod ‘that fox’. He was intolerant of what He saw as the hypocrisy of the leaders of his religion: *You Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses are in for trouble! You’re nothing but show-offs. You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. You won’t go in yourselves, and you keep others from going in. You travel over land and sea to win one follower. And when you have done so, you make that person twice as fit for hell as you are* (Mt 23:13-16), and *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean* (Mt 23:27).

So how does that sit with our understanding of tolerance?

On the other hand, Jesus reached out to the outcaste, to those who were often despised by the Establishment, rejected or excluded by others, made outcasts by their religious rules at times. He reached out to those who had different beliefs – the Syrophoenician woman at the well, for example - Mark goes to great lengths to inform us that she was a pagan by telling us that she was both Greek and, by race, a Phoenician. Jesus says that, in meeting the Roman Centurion, that ‘in all Israel I have not seen faith

like this’. He made one of those considered to be ‘different’ the central character in one of the most enduring stories of all time – the Good Samaritan. Jesus was accused (rightly as a matter of fact) of going to the homes of sinners (forbidden by Jewish law) and even eating with sinners, eating with those who were considered by ‘the good people’ to be unclean, not those we ought to be seen with. The parable of the prodigal son is a story of active and compassionate tolerance, a story of reconciliation – welcoming back the son who had walked out of home and, by his way of life, abandoned his beliefs and his family.

Jesus challenged some of those who came to him for their narrow vision: *Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret the signs of the time?* (Luke 12:56). The signs of the times were the signs of God’s presence and activity in our world. All these years later, he reminds us of our need to be open and sensitive to those signs too. Our intolerance can blind us to those signs, if we allow that to happen. Being open to the signs of the times implies an openness to others. Beware of the religion that turns one against another one. That’s not a sign of God’s invitation of friendship to all. God has not abandoned our world, God’s vision is still as relevant as it ever was. Jesus’ example is as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago.

Tolerance isn’t meek acceptance, just letting things go, ‘live and let live’, ‘it is really none of my business’ type of attitude. It is often misunderstood to mean that. There are behaviours, values, ways of treating others, ways of treating creation that ought to be challenged. We are not asked to be so ‘understanding’, so accommodating that we deny our own beliefs, what we hold to be dear. But, as Jesus’ example illustrates, that is not permission to trample on what others believe. It is not permission to stand idly by when others are in difficulties, or in the face of injustice, or abuse of others or their rights. Tolerance implies an openness of mind, a desire to learn from others, curiosity, a desire to know more; it implies a generosity of spirit, a commitment to compassion and justice. It is about a desire to enrich our lives and the lives of others by our genuine and gracious contact.

Regards
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