

Sermon 2025.09.14

At the start of the gospel for today we encounter two groups of people who seem like mirror images of one another: there are the tax-collectors and sinners and there are the Pharisees and scribes. These groups are both a bit inconsistent: tax-collectors are a profession but sinners is a generic grouping of anyone who 'sins', whatever that might mean. By the same token, scribes stands for a profession, but Pharisees denotes a particular philosophical school - as they would've been understood in the classical world but based, in this middle eastern context, on how they choose to interpret the Hebrew scriptures. So these are not homogeneous groupings. But they are mutually exclusive: if you're a tax-collector or sinner you're excluded from being a Pharisee or scribe; and if you're a pharisee or scribe, you're excluded from being a tax-collector or sinner. They're mirror images because we can safely assume the tax-collectors and sinners would like to belong to the Pharisee and scribe in-group; and maybe there are members of the Pharisee and scribe in-group who secretly admire the freedom of the tax-collectors and sinners. Both groups exclude the other, so that when Jesus on this occasion allows the tax-collectors and sinners to listen to him – nothing more than that – the Pharisees and scribes grumble and accuse him – this fellow who should logically be one of them - of welcoming the other group and even eating with them. What a horrid thought! And likewise, we can imagine those occasions when Jesus speaks and eats with Pharisees, we can imagine the tax-

collectors and sinners saying among themselves: how can this Jesus be a man of the people, how can he really be one of us, if he associates with the likes of them!?

But Jesus refuses to be categorised: he tells them (ie the grumbling Pharisees and scribes) two parables about how those who have gone astray in some way – a sheep, a coin – bring joy when they're found. Presumably the tax-collectors and sinners are still present, but this is not intended to make them feel superior in some way to the self-righteous Pharisees and the pedantic scribes. They already know they can never aspire to such status, as much as they'd like to – if not for themselves, at least for the sake of their children.

Now I said last week I'd go home and read the piece about the Plymouth Brethren (who used to call themselves the exclusive brethren – but the change in name has not made them any less exclusive, it seems). It was a horrifying article about a group in our community that locks women (and also men, in another way) into set roles, and it's most powerful way of doing this is by exclusion. Anyone who leaves the community is immediately excluded from their own family of origin; and if they leave after they've had children, they exclude themselves from their own children (and this control is strengthened by early, largely arranged marriages and a ban on contraception). So we have a whole group of people in our suburbs who are effectively cut off from contact with the wider community, a group that lives in supposedly self-chosen isolation but which in fact controls every aspect of its

members lives. And it calls itself a Christian group. It seems to me to be in almost every way the antithesis of Christianity – I’m appalled they claim to be Christian.

And yet, once I say this, in fact once I even think it, aren’t I also setting up a barrier of exclusion? Aren’t I also claiming, self-righteously, that I am somehow more Christian, more better as my grandson would say, than this other group? Once I exclude I am doing the opposite of what Jesus does and says in this passage we heard today.

So how are we to act in this situation? The temptation is to say: we’re not like them. They’re not really Christian – but we are.

When there’s exclusion there’s always a sacrifice, and we sacrifice the one or the group that in some way is like us, that in some way we secretly aspire be. The scribes and Pharisees sacrifice the sinners and tax collectors; the sinners and tax-collectors cheerfully consign the Pharisees and scribes and all their works to the devil. But Jesus is publicly speaking out against the sacrifice of the lost sheep or the mislaid coin.

For us, when we read the Age article on the Plymouth brethren, Don’t we secretly envy their numbers in the Age photo, even though we might be appalled by their rigid gender roles – while conveniently forgetting that it’s not so long ago we

imposed some of these same gender roles ourselves? And don't we secretly envy their tribes of very well-behaved children, all sitting quietly and obediently in church? While conveniently forgetting that we ourselves have not always sat quietly or obediently in church with our hearts and minds focussed on the matters on which we're asked to focus? And when we are tempted to protest that they are not really Christian, but we are, aren't we sacrificing them to the outraged hounds of public opinion? We sacrifice those who in some way represent us – even if just by claiming to be Christian.

Somehow, hard as it may be, we have to recognise that the decisive sacrifice has been made for us, and that's the one we commemorate every Good Friday, and indeed every eucharist, and that this means we are set free from the need to sacrifice; free from the need to exclude those who are so different from us – so other than us – at least in the imaginations of our hearts, but who – if we look into these same hearts of ours – are uncannily like us in one way or another.

Now in saying all this I'm not making some sort of apologetic for the Plymouth Brethren – I have not doubt they are heretical, though this is not a word we like to use in these polite times – but their real, fundamental heresy is not about the gender roles that the newspapers like to highlight, but it's the heresy of exclusion. It is exclusion that Jesus in today's gospel – and throughout the gospels – takes on, and he takes it - head on. It's true we don't want to be represented by what this or that

group considers to be Christianity. But the lost coin is to be looked for; the lost sheep is to be found.