



Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 29 August 2021

READINGS

Song of Solomon 2: 8-13; Psalm 45: 1-2, 6-9; James 1: 17-27; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Month of compassion: Immigrants and refugees

Greetings Friends. Today, as you may know, being the final Sunday of the month of compassion, our focus is on the plight of immigrants and refugees. What I hope to do is to use the Gospel reading as a springboard from which to talk about issues relating to immigrants and refugees, and foreigners at large.

It might be good to precede these thoughts with a brief reflection on some of the history of South Africa's reception of foreign nationals. As we know, under apartheid, South Africans were taught to discriminate against each other on the basis of their ethnicity. We still carry this history with us. The adage of history repeating itself is applicable here perhaps. Often, throughout history, societies which suffer violence inflict similar forms of violence at later stages on others. The Jews who suffered the holocaust have implemented what some describe as an apartheid system in their own country. The first concentration camps, managed by the British, imprisoned Boer families during the Anglo-Boer war. There are many examples of violence perpetuating itself through successive generations.

Since our transition to democracy there have, as you know, been a number of sporadic outbursts of xenophobic attacks, the most severe of which were in 2008 and 2015, resulting in the destruction of many thousands of livelihoods and the death of many foreign nationals and South Africans. It is somewhat surprising that the recent unrest and looting in KZN and parts of Gauteng did not also involve xenophobic sentiment, although the shops of some foreign nationals were affected and racial tension between Indian and Black South Africans fuelled the conflict in Phoenix. Nevertheless, when it comes to the approach of South Africans toward foreign nationals, especially in light of the reception of South Africans living in exile in other African countries under apartheid, South Africans sadly do not have a good track record.

South Africa is economically attractive for many living on the African continent and so it stands to reason that people from other African countries would seek residence and employment here. A 2019 UN report said as much as 7% of the South African population is comprised of foreign nationals. We might then understand how feelings of resentment toward foreign nationals is easily provoked within poor and poorly resourced communities given the competition over resources here. How then do we address the issue of xenophobia and how do South Africans dispense with such resentment and instead learn to value and appreciate the presence and activity of foreign nationals?

We have already noted how certain socio-economic factors may contribute to xenophobic sentiments. When it comes to inter- and intra-group dynamics there is another form of exclusivism which we see at work in fact in our Gospel reading. In social theory there is a general principle which holds true for most societies and cultures. This is that the level of a given group's internal governance is proportional to its level of exclusivism. In other words, the more elaborate, strict and severe a group's internal rules and regulation, the more exclusive it will be towards outsiders. This is true of groups in the New Testament like the Pharisees who, with their many elaborate laws and rituals, were highly exclusive and derogatory of anyone not belonging to their sect. It is true on a larger scale of so-called dictator states like North Korea, and perhaps even China. And it is possible that this or a similar dynamic is at work in the history of South Africa.

Conversely, we see that the more relaxed a group is in terms of its rules and internal governance, the more easily it accepts outsiders. We could say that this is probably true of Jesus. In his relaxation of many of the proscriptions of Jewish Torah he was also very welcoming of a wide range of people from various social rank and even ethnicity. Of course, there were other factors involved here. This is but one way of approaching and understanding Jesus' ethic and action. Even today we see, in the case of religious sects, that their very strict internal measures of governance translate into a general suspicion of outsiders.

So where do we stand on this spectrum or axis, as a Church, and as a society? Undoubtedly, a certain number of rules, a certain level of regulation, is necessary for the function of any group but perhaps we can also see part of Jesus' mandate, in his revision of Torah, as a matter of returning to the basics. Jewish groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees began as reform movements in response to the wider Hellenization that was taking place within ancient Judaism. In other words, their initial mandate was to protect the core values of Judaism. However, over time, they made the various laws, and their minute interpretation of them, into an end in itself. Torah was not intended to be an end, but a means to an end, which was and still is God. The same process occurred in the medieval Catholic Church, where the system of indulgences became an end in itself. Like Torah under the Pharisees, instead of facilitating greater access to God (which was their intended purpose) they ended up doing the opposite by precluding people from God. In returning to the basics, and in returning to the essence of Judaism, Jesus was pointing to a loving God who did not discriminate against anyone on any basis. If this is ever not at the core of our ethos, as a Church, and as a society, then perhaps we have to try to get the basics right again.

Amen