

SERMON FOR TRINITY II | 12.08.2018

This week, all the news seems to have been about Boris Johnson and the appropriateness (or not) of wearing of the Burqa. Leaving aside his typically headline grabbing comments about pillar boxes and bank robbers, this issue continues to be topical. Jack Straw famously refused to talk to women wearing a burqa in his one-to-one talks as an MP and now Denmark of all places has banned it in public places. It was a very hot topic when I was in Bradford; in the space of what seemed like no time at all at all, the burqa became a very familiar sight on local streets.

And I have been trying to wrestle with the rights and wrongs of this albeit minority cultural expression in the light of a campaign by the new bishop of Gloucester, Rachel Treweek, whom many of us remember when she was our local Archdeacon.

One of the gifts of having women bishops is that they bring up different issues to talk about and her concern recently has been about the way young people, especially girls, have a really negative feeling about their own bodies. The statistics speak for themselves:

- 20% of teens are either “rarely” or “never” happy with their body image
- 52% feel that the media pressures them to change their body image
- 73% of teens feel their appearance affects how they feel about themselves
- 31% of teens have at least one body part on which they would like to get surgery
- 56% of teens feel that the media’s advertisements are the main cause of low self-esteem

Rachel then goes on to say that from the very earliest books and videos that children are exposed to, it is always the prettiest people that are the most successful - the blonde, the slim and blue eyed who end up being the leaders. *Is it any wonder, she says, that we see a new generation with such low self-esteem. Is it any wonder we are now coping with increasing mental health problems which are rooted in how people look? And she is backed up by the findings of the Children’s Society which says that up to a third of girls are unhappy about their appearance and which asks whether that is related to the fact that so many magazines blatantly airbrush their images so that readers end up feeling inadequate.*

When Jesus talks about all of us being part of his body and St Paul reminds us that *we are the body of Christ* because of our baptism, it doesn't take a great leap of imagination to see how the parallels work for us as ordinary Christians too.

Because there are any number of examples of how other people are better than us – those who know their Bibles better, who pray more, those better at talking about their faith to other people, those who give more money to charity, who are on every conceivable Church rota, who seem to be the life and soul of the party.

On the other hand there are definitely people who we may feel are less good than us: this week the Church press has been full of stories about the abuse of young children in Church boarding schools and the sad breakdown of relationships between the Churches in Northern Ireland.

So when I try to work my way through the burqa issue – about how we balance the right of religious people to wear whatever they like as against the need to see the person we are speaking to - I am brought up against exactly the same issue: how can we balance the feelings of a lot of people (not just women) who feel inadequate and shy in wider company and who find the burqa empowering because they can't be seen, with what I believe to be Jesus' more compelling invitation for society as a whole to be far more accepting of others who are different.

And that leads us to the 'isms' – racism and agism being just two examples. How we look at people and talk about people stems essentially from the question: do I feel I am part of the same 'body' as this person? Do I feel in any way related to the French, the Welsh, the Pakistani, the Russian? Am I content to be counted alongside people who are overly fat, chronically thin, beautiful in every way or really rather plain?

Can I say, honestly that I am part of the same family as the Christian who persecutes Muslims as much as the Church which is persecuted by them? Am I secure enough in my faith to acknowledge that in my Church family there are paedophiles as well as saints and that I am able to find ways of accepting them as people, even if I can't excuse what they do?

Your body, my body, is a collection of cells – and, whether we like it or not, some of them are more beautiful and more vital than others. But they all have to be managed because the reality is that we can't just focus on the beautiful and it is often the less attractive bits that are doing most of the work.

So instead of covering up, burqa style, perhaps it would be more healthy if we learned to appreciate one another's so-called blemishes in a much less judgmental and commercial way, reminding ourselves that beauty is only skin deep and that all humanity is beautiful in its own way and comes in a whole host of different packaging – some of which, we have to admit, is a bit damaged and knocked at the edges.

Jesus wasn't very interested in what a person looked like or sounded like. His question always was: *do you love your neighbour more than you love yourself?* My neighbour the burqa wearer who might, in time, feel less keen to wear the veil when she knows that nobody is judging her; my neighbour with a handicap who needs me to see beyond what they can't do and into their world of hopes, aspirations, insights – and frustrations.

So that, as I hold out my hands to receive God's undeserved grace in Holy Communion, what I am doing is to accept my place in this huge, diverse and contradictory body – acknowledging that, as the pew sheet says, 'we are the Church - together'.

A Church which, in its failures to be what God intended, is still the place where God feeds us with the Bread of Life - indiscriminately.

Because it is his choice that all of us are welcome. And we are welcome most of all if we come as we are, without pretending to be better than anyone else. In fact, like Elijah in our first reading, we can be at our wits end, only too aware of how badly we have behaved. Yet God will always accept us - and always feed us.

All he asks is that we accept his way of doing things. The Church may appear broken, full of people we can criticize - but it is still sufficiently intact to do the work it was called to perform. In so many ways it is still beautiful – but its beauty lies not in its apparent perfection but in our willingness to accept one another - on equal terms - because we are part of his Body.