

SERMON FOR TRINITY 10 | 16.08.2020

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8; Romans 11: 1-21, 29-32; St Matthew 15: 10-20

Perhaps the Victorians had got it right. Go to the Victoria and Albert Museum or that great re-creation of 19th century working life at the village museum in Beamish in Co Durham, and there you will see it: every table completely draped in thick cloths to prevent anyone getting excited by the sight - of table legs! Unlike the classically inspired 18th century every statue, every painting depicts figures in layers of clothing. One of the earliest books I remember reading at home was Gwen Raverat's *Period Piece* about growing up in Cambridge between 1890 and the First World War. One of her beautiful line drawings shows a child acting as a chaperone to courting couples in punts on hot summer days and shows the way the ladies – when passing that part of the Cam where the local boys swam naked - would cover their faces with parasols! I thought it was terribly funny at the time.

And now; now we see everything. The work of the censor or the Lord Chamberlain has vanished and even on terrestrial TV we have only a remnant of the old rules in the 9pm watershed.

And yet the most disturbing thing I ever saw on the screen in my youth – the image that I can still see in bad dreams has nothing to do with sex at all. It was an old black and white film shown at the Kinema fleapit in Mill Road which included the drowning of a beloved daughter in a whirlpool in India between the wars. And what distressed me then (as now) was the pain of the parents as they watched the boat she was in disappearing into the water, too far out for them to be able to save her.

Of course what we see deeply affect us. We are all too familiar with the warnings by Clive Myrie and others that *the pictures you are about to see may distress some viewers*. And we take in horrendous pictures of famine, war, natural disasters and violence which are literally stomach churning. In our dramas we will see attitudes and events which are just appalling. I have just read Edna O'Brien's 'Girl' about the abduction of local schoolgirls by Boko Haram in 2014. At times you were almost frightened to turn the page for fear of what would come next.

When Jesus was talking to the crowds in 1st century Palestine, the content might have been different but the challenge to the mind was exactly the same. Take care of what you see and hear but don't be fooled into thinking that is where the major danger lies.

Unlike the wishful thinking of the Victorians, or the self-righteous regulations of the Pharisees, there are no ways of protecting ourselves from thoughts and ideas that are deeply disturbing. And talking to a member of a religious community recently, apparently you can't escape these things by living in a monastery! Censorship is no answer either: who is able to judge or say what is decent or safe or in the public interest?

What Jesus does is to turn the apparent solution on its head and to warn us not about what goes in – through our mouths, our eyes and our ears - but what comes out ... in what we say, and think, in our behaviour and in the overall way we relate to one another. *For the things that come out of the mouth are what makes us 'unclean': it is our own evil thoughts that condemn us.*

So far so good, that all makes sense. But what about the bit in between? What about the psychological, human and spiritual process that lies in between the difficult things what we take in – and what we allow ourselves to say and do? How do we cope with the tragic, the salacious and the down-right corrupting?

Previous generations would, like the Victorians, have simply attempted to cover up what was thought immoral and dangerous. And much good it did them.

Because it is ignorance that is our greatest weakness. As the world celebrates the end of the war in the Far East this week-end, more and more information about that conflict is coming out. Glibly we can rejoice at the defeat the Japanese war machine in 1945 but what I had not realised how so many Japanese civilians – forced by their government to move to mainland China in the 1930s - were killed and mistreated by Chinese and Russian forces after the surrender. They were airbrushed out the story so we can learn nothing from their experience.

And it is this desire to get rid of that combination of 'not knowing' and 'not caring' that lies at the heart of Jesus' teaching.

But watching that flickering Indian black and white film all those years ago, reading Edna O'Brien or the backstories of some of the events that have hit the headlines recently - does not then give me a license to copy what I have come across.

It demands that I process what I have taken in it – making sense of it where I can, and most of all expanding my heart to be aware of both the possibilities and the pain that these events throw up.

So then what? Two things.

First, if I want to be of real use and however much I try to be like blotting paper, absorbing these issues and attitudes without becoming cynical or deaf, I know that this is more than I can do on my own. If I didn't have a faith and a life of prayer – somewhere where I could take all this stuff - I would simply drown.

As Christians one of the most vital gifts we have to draw on is the way the Holy Spirit offers to take the burden off our shoulders: after all 99.9% of what we come across we can do nothing about. But we can pray, and we can take notice when that prayer suggests that there are actually things we can do to help.

But the other challenge is to do with masks. As I have tried to suggest in the *Weekly News*, we know the medical reasons for wearing face coverings and we simply have to learn not to make too much fuss about it. But what worries me is that masks become yet another barrier between us so that our lives are even more water-tight than before: that the face covering holds in more than just germs; it retains our emotions too.

The call to love is not some kind of facile, surface thing. Jesus talked about him and his Father 'being one'. The reason why 'covering up' difficult issues is so wrong is that God has made this amazing and mind bogglingly complicated world in the way that he has – so that we can learn to love, appreciate and serve one another 'warts and all'. As Isaiah reminds us, his house is to be *a house of prayer for everyone*, not just the successful or the lucky or the familiar.

We take in the pain, the un-pretty and the mismanaged and we 'turn it round' by our acceptance and our search for the truth.

Sadly, masks can be more than just medical protection. They can also stop us from engaging with each other at a deeper level. And they can stop us offering that compassionate vulnerability which lies at the heart of all that Jesus was about.

As I think about Dr Kylie Moore-Gilbert lying on the filthy floor of that prison in the Iranian desert, we take in the information -trying not to get stuck in the details of what we read. What we give out, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is our focused attention and our commitment not to give up until she is released.

Breath in – ‘whatever’, however shocking, however corrupt. Breathe out the authentic and life-saving truth: *blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*