

CTW & St Mary's Holy Communion 13th October 2019

17th Sunday after Trinity / Proper 23 – ‘Brexit Sunday’

2 Kings 5:1-3,7-15 2 Timothy 2:8-15 Luke 17:11-19

we’ve had another week of wrangling and uncertainty over Brexit, as the 31st October deadline approaches; our senior bishops chipped in with a statement, urging moderation and respect in our debates, which had them jumped on from all sides, especially in the Church Times – just look at the letters in last week’s edition! perhaps we need to observe this as ‘Brexit Sunday’?

Rod Cosh, our Area Dean, commented that we’d not been so divided as a country since the civil war; there are villages that took opposite sides in that conflict, that are still not on speaking terms nearly 400 years later! will the same be said in 400 years of areas that voted ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’?

whenever they show shots of the Houses of Parliament on the news, you can see the blue of Remain, and red of Leave lined up in the background, with their placards and slogans; isn’t it sad how people can unite against a common external enemy, but internal conflicts rip us apart!?

we get regular news of the situation in South Sudan, and how the churches are working for reconciliation there; for decades the south fought against the northern government and eventually gained independence in 2011; but just two years later, all the old tribal and political animosities broke out, and now many areas are in a worse state than before independence; how sad! the closest enemy can so often be the worst!

today’s Bible readings offer us two stories of enemies and faith:

in 2 Kings 5, Naaman is described as a great man, a mighty warrior, commander of the army of Aram (modern Syria, more or less); but he has a problem – he suffers from leprosy

Aram is the enemy of Israel; they’ve been sending in raiding parties, and capturing slaves; among them is a young girl who tells her mistress of the prophet back home who can cure her master

our reading leaves out the bit where the King of Aram writes to the King of Israel: ‘I am sending my servant to you, so that you may cure him of his leprosy’

no wonder he reacts so violently: ‘what? am I God, that this man asks me to cure his servant? he is just picking a quarrel with me!’; a typical reaction of enemies here, a complete lack of trust, and always the suspicion of some hidden agenda

then Elisha, ‘the Man of God’, hears of it, and writes to the King: ‘send him to me, that he may learn there is a prophet in Israel’; we sense some religious one-up-man-ship here, ‘we can show Johnny foreigner a thing or two in the faith department!’

Naaman arrives in state, with his horses and chariots, and his gifts of ‘10 talents of silver, 6000 shekels of gold and 10 sets of clothing’; that must have been an impressive sight, but Elisha doesn’t even go out to greet him; he just sends word, ‘go, wash seven times in the Jordan’

Naaman is furious; ‘the rivers back home are far better than this piddling little Jordan; I could have washed in them, rather than coming all this way! he should treat me with the respect I deserve!’

but once more humble, ordinary people play a crucial part; first it was the little slave girl; now it’s Naaman’s own servants who persuade him to wash as instructed; so he is cured and recognises that ‘there is no God in all the earth except in Israel’

we can hear a cheer go up from the Israelite camp – this high and mighty foreigner, and non-believer, has humbled himself to obey our prophet, and seen the light – our God is the best! hurrah! we won!

do we ever indulge in that sort of triumphalism, where ‘our side’ is vindicated and ‘the enemy’ is put in his place? do we do this even in matters of faith? alas for human nature – what we like? what hope is there of a better way?

now wind forward 800 years, to very much the same part of the world; Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, heading south through ‘the region between Samaria and Galilee’, when he meets this group of lepers

I think this story reads rather like a parable, with its 10 lepers, not than 9 or 11, but 10, as a nice round number to set the scene; it begins with a simple cry for help, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us’; and there follows a simple miracle of healing, ‘as they went, they were made clean’

that could have been it, but then comes the sting in the tail, as in so many of the parables, where just one of the ten returns to thank Jesus; and here comes the punchline – ‘and he was a Samaritan’

what was it, with Jews and Samaritans? why were they such bitter enemies? why does this enmity feature so much in the New Testament? think of James and John wanting to call down fire on a Samaritan village that didn’t welcome them! time to fill in a bit of regional history since the days of Elisha and Naaman ...

not long after that, the Assyrians overran the area and took most of the population into exile, replacing them with other peoples, who intermarried with the remnant; the result was a mixed race, with a ‘mixed’ religion; they shared the Torah, the first five books of our Bible, with their Jewish neighbours, but the centre of their worship was at Mount Gerizim, in Samaria, rather than in Jerusalem; these were the Samaritans

here is the ‘enemy’ close at hand, the bitter rivalry of near neighbours, the irreconcilable dispute between family members, that is so much harder to resolve than conflict with a more distant foe!

Luke has more to say about the Samaritans than the other gospels; he alone includes the Parable of the Good Samaritan; Samaritans feature in his understanding of the universal reach of Jesus’ ministry, that extends into the book of Acts; when the risen Christ commissions the apostles in Acts 1, Samaria is a kind of threshold between the Jewish homeland and worldwide mission: ‘You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’

now back to today’s story ...

if the Good Samaritan gives Jesus' own people, the Jews, a lesson in how to 'love your neighbour', this Samaritan leper shows them what it means to 'love God', as he turns back, 'praising God with a loud voice', and prostrates himself at Jesus' feet; to him alone Jesus says, 'your faith has made you well / your faith has saved you'

for Luke the Samaritans reveal God's purposes of love for the whole world

what have these two stories, of faith crossing boundaries of culture, race, enmity, to teach us today? first they are a good reminder that all of us are, in Paul's words, in Ephesians 2:

'Gentiles ... separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise'; we come from many different races, languages and cultures, and yet we've all been welcomed into God's kingdom; I was struck by this, looking around the church at the confirmation service last Sunday – what a variety of people were there, all sharing faith in Christ

let us never take the attitude that this privilege is ours by right, or that others deserve to be excluded from it; if God has shown such grace to us, who are we to withhold it from others, even those we might call our enemies?

if that is to be the way we see our faith, can we take the same gracious attitude in our present divisions over Brexit? our own bishops, +Steven and the rest, wrote this week to all church leaders about this; here is an extract from their letter, 'A Christian Response to Brexit': (the full text follows below)

'Our nation is divided about our future relationships in Europe. Our calling as the Church in these times is not to take sides in this debate but to continue to be the Church for everyone. There are leavers and remainers in every congregation, but this can never be our primary identity as Christians.

'We have a particular responsibility to speak out for the poorest in our communities and to act to help them. We are to work for peace and the common good. There is an important role for practical expressions of love and hope by communities and individuals.

the bishops have also sent us this poster with: *a **Brexit Checklist** – Twelve ways to love your neighbour as yourself*; this includes:

support for the food bank; care for the lonely, anxious and vulnerable, especially EU nationals; access to good advice on migration, travel, debt; work together with statutory services, churches and other faith groups; encourage truthful and honest debate; hold hustings during the General Election campaign; pray for the healing of our political life'

Jesus teaches us to love our neighbour, even to love our enemy; that is, not even to see them as 'enemy', but as much loved by God as we are; we are offer that love across divisions of faith or political outlook, to let go of our 'rightness' and seek the common good

The full text of the Oxford bishops' letter:

Love your neighbour as yourself: a **Christian** response to Brexit

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you... and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29.7)

We are writing as bishops to every church, school and chaplaincy in the Diocese of Oxford and to every disciple at this critical moment in our national life.

As a nation we may be about to exit the European Union and begin a new relationship with our European neighbours and with the world. At the time of writing, the course of events is uncertain – and the prolonged uncertainty is itself challenging. How are we to respond in the coming months as the Church of England across Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes?

Six hundred years before the birth of Christ, the prophet Jeremiah wrote to those sent into exile in Babylon. His words resonate powerfully today. We are to seek the welfare of our cities, towns and villages in these difficult months. The word translated welfare here is shalom: peace, well-being and prosperity. These must be our goal.

There are over a thousand churches, schools and chaplaincies in the Diocese of Oxford and over 50,000 regular worshippers. We are calling on everyone to remember the commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves, especially in the coming weeks. Together we can make a significant difference.

The Church of England and Brexit

Our nation is divided about our future relationship in Europe. Our calling as the Church in these times is not to take sides in this debate but to continue to be the Church for everyone. There are leavers and remainers in every congregation, but this can never be our primary identity as Christians.

We have a particular responsibility at this time to speak out for the poorest in our communities and to act to help them (as the church has always done). We have a responsibility to work for the peace and the common good. We are called to offer in public and in private a voice of truth and a voice for hope in the future. The Bishops of the Church of England made [a public statement](#) recently calling for listening, respect and renewal in political life.

As the Church we bring a long perspective on the present debates. We know from our own history that the United Kingdom has re-imagined its relationship with Europe many times in the past. The Church of England came into existence as part of one of these eras of change. In a few weeks, we will all remember again those who gave their lives in the great wars of the twentieth century which were focussed around conflict across Europe.

As the Church, our friendships with Europe and with the Church across Europe will continue and deepen whatever the political and economic settlement.

What can we do?

National and local government have done a great deal to plan for a smooth and orderly Brexit (with or without a deal). However, there is an important role at this time for practical expressions of love and hope by communities and individuals. The exact needs will vary from one parish or benefice to another. These are some of the things you may need to consider and think about as Church Councils, school governing bodies, small groups and families.

Twelve ways to love your neighbour as yourself, a Brexit checklist:

1. Give extra support to the food banks in your area. There may be temporary shortages of some foods. Prices may rise. Foodbank usage may also rise. Signpost your local foodbank. Make sure stocks are high, and there are enough volunteers.
2. Watch out for the lonely, the anxious and the vulnerable. Levels of fear are rising and may rise further. Knock on your neighbours doors and check if they are OK. Speak to people on the bus and at work. Build networks and friendships.
3. Reach out to EU nationals in your neighbourhood and workplace. This is a moment for friendship and hospitality and love for the stranger. As we leave the European Union, or as the uncertainty continues, people are likely to feel less welcome.
4. Make sure people have access to good advice on migration and travel, and qualified advice on debt and financial support. It may be possible to set up a temporary drop-in centre in Church for EU citizens or for UK citizens anxious about relatives abroad. Point people to relevant websites.
5. Remember the needs of children and young people. Our schools and churches can be a place of balance and sanctuary for our children, who may be feeling upset and anxious. The Mental Health Foundation has [excellent advice on talking to children about scary world news](#). Parents and teachers might want to use this as an opportunity to demonstrate how different media cover the same story.
6. Support the statutory services. A lot of good, solid planning has been done by local authorities. Familiarise yourself with your local authority plans and point people to them. Meet with your local councillors and neighbourhood police officers.
7. Think about the needs of particular groups in your area. Some parts of the diocese have large communities of migrant workers from a particular region. Other parts will want to focus on the farming industry and its need for seasonal workers. What are the local challenges where you live?
8. Work together with other churches, faith communities and charities. There are some excellent examples of collaboration across the Diocese in foodbanks, debt counselling and night shelters. How else could we work in partnership?
9. Invite the community together. Encouraging discussion about the rights and wrongs of Brexit is unlikely to be helpful. Gather people to listen to each other about what concerns them looking forward and how communities can be brought together despite acknowledged differences. Gatherings over a meal can be helpful as can skilled facilitation.
10. Watch over other faith and minority ethnic communities. Hate crimes and crimes against other faiths increased after the 2016 referendum. Reconnect with the mosques, synagogues and gurdwaras in your area.
11. Encourage truthful and honest debate. The renewal of our politics will need to be local as well as national. Plan now to host hustings during the General Election campaign. Don't be afraid of the political space but step into it with a message of faith, hope and love.
12. Pray in public worship and private prayer for the healing of our political life, for wisdom for those who lead us, for reconciliation between communities and for stability in our government.

Don't underestimate what we can achieve if every church, chaplaincy and school does something and if every Christian disciple takes some action, however small.