

As I read over our Epistle and Gospel set for today, the 3rd Sunday before Lent, my mind went back to a BBC lunchtime radio series I used to enjoy called 'After Henry'. The story centred on three women living together in a house in separate flats. There was a widow getting over the recent loss of her husband Henry. In the flat upstairs was her mother and in the flat below there was her daughter. They were each determined characters in their own way but the figure who came to mind as I read these passages was the grand mother who had very fixed ideas on all social and political issues all reinforced by the conviction that God saw things exactly as she did.

Of course the force of stories such as this is that they reveal something about ourselves and our own attitudes. We can be very open to other people's views but there is that feeling that we are on the right track. It is this that came to mind as I reflected on the closing section of our Gospel reading. Picture the scene; Jesus had slipped away from the group of disciples for a time of quiet prayer. Simon and the others seek him out. 'Lord, we have a lot on today, after yesterday everyone is looking for you.' Jesus says, 'Let's go elsewhere, to other villages, other communities, other people.' The disciples had their eyes on the community they knew, the community that had responded, the community in which they felt comfortable. Jesus, in this account, looks beyond and encourages his followers to do the same.

Christ invites us to look beyond ourselves, our own particular comfort zones. This account always stands as a reminder to me that our understanding of Christ, our understanding of God is by its very nature partial. Brother Roger of Taize often spoke of our faith as provisional, in that it must always be open to

new insights, always ready to learn, to grow until that time we are known even as we are fully known.

This Gospel passage also reminds me that I must recognise in other communities, other cultures, other traditions ones to whom Christ has also come, also spoken, through whom and in whom he has also acted. As I reflect on all this my thoughts are gathered together in terms of openness, inclusiveness. I must have the humility to realise that I do not have a monopoly on understanding, that I must not, unlike the grandmother in ‘After Henry’ fall into the trap of assuming that God sees things exactly as I do; I must have the humility to recognise in the other, in the different, the words, the actions, the presence of Christ.

With this in mind I now turn to our Epistle, from Paul’s 1st Letter to the Corinthians, and in particular his confession ‘I have become all things to all people; that I might by all means save some.’ ‘He is all things to all men’ is not usually used in complimentary terms. It usually speaks of weakness, of indecision, of vacillation. So what is in the mind of Paul, the strong, the single minded champion of the Gospel, as he uses terms such as these?

Paul, as a Pharisee, would have had a very strong sense of being separate, of being different. He would have kept a distance between himself and Gentiles and less scrupulous Jews. He would not have shared meals with them or any form of fellowship. But in the light of his encounter with Christ, Paul now has a very different understanding. His consciousness of the call that has been placed upon him calls forth a very different attitude towards the one he encounters, whether Jew or Gentile. There is a respect for the other, a desire to

engage with the other. As a former Pharisee, he will understand the inner conflict in a recent Jewish convert as they struggle with the habits of a lifetime, the strict dietary codes, the avoidance of fellowship with non-Jews and their new found freedom in Christ. As one hounded out of synagogues in the course of his own missionary journeys, he will know the pain of exclusion, of rejection.

One of the most powerful images of the Church in the New Testament is that of the Body, the Body of Christ. The body is made up of separate, very different parts but there is a fundamental unity. Each part of the Body is important, each part of the Body is to be valued by the others. The Body as a whole is the poorer if any part is lost.

We are the Body of Christ in this place. We are different – young and old, with differing worship preferences, some preferring the more reflective, some the more exuberant; some leaning more towards the sacramental end of worship, some more towards the proclamation of the word – but at the heart of that difference is a fundamental unity as we each seek to understand and to respect the preferences and aspirations of the other.

Each of us, over the years, has developed our own particular understanding of the faith, our own particular way of relating to and worshiping the God who has met us in Christ. Let us recognise in each other fellow pilgrims on the road and, in fellowship with the Christ who accompanies each one of us on that road, listening to one another, sharing with one another, come to a deeper understanding of the Christ we each seek to serve.