

‘Who do they think they are?’

This is the title of a television series that became very popular and was shown in a number of different countries across the world. Celebrities were enabled to track down their roots; where they had come from, what their forbears did, where they lived.

When used in a different context it can take on the form of a challenge. Who are you to speak like that, who are you to boss me around? It can be said in the context of putting someone in their place, someone who clearly was getting notions about themselves.

I know who you are, you grew up in the same street as me, we went to the same school. You know - he’s no different to us. That could almost read as a paraphrase of the first part of our Gospel reading, the reaction of the congregation in the synagogue in Nazareth.

You know – he’s no different to us. In a very strange way that pinpoints a fundamental truth about the Incarnation, God coming among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Athanasius, one of the key figures in the formulation of our Nicene Creed, said this of the Incarnation:

He became like us so that we might become more like him.

Could we just park those words for a while and go back to our text?

‘Who does he think he is?’ ‘And they took offence at him.’ The word that we have translated as ‘took offence’ is ἐσκανδαλίζοντο. This has the same root as

the word σκανδαλον, from which we derive our word ‘scandal’. This is a word that occurs at different points in the New Testament. We read in 1st Peter:

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,”

and

“A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.” *1 Peter 2:7,8*

The rock that makes them fall, the rock of offence, of scandal has become the chief corner stone. Part of Jesus’ vocation was to challenge, to question. He stood alongside those on the margins. He touched the leper, he welcomed sinners to eat with him. People looked on shocked as he allowed a woman to wash his feet with her tears of remorse – he calls himself a prophet and he allows her of all people to wash his feet? People, respectable people, were scandalised, were offended.

It is here that I go back to those words of Athanasius that I parked a few minutes ago:

He became like us so that we might become more like him.

As I do that I just want to pick up on that word Prophet used by Jesus in our reading this morning. The people who heard him that day would be have aware of the Prophets of the Old Testament, the role they played in the period leading up to and following the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile in Babylon. In one sense they could be seen as something of an awkward squad. They spoke truth to power, standing before Kings, standing in the public square, asking the uncomfortable question, speaking the challenging word. ‘Thus says the Lord’ This is wrong. Continue this way and your society will crumble.

He became like us so that we might become more like him.

They took offence at him. They took offence at what he was doing, took offence at what he was saying, took offence at who he was. We are called as members of the Church, the Body of Christ to be something of an irritant in contemporary society, asking the awkward question on issues of public morality, modelling a different way of living in the world of today, standing alongside those on the margins of our society.

Of course, an irritant can produce something beautiful. A piece of sand or grit may get into an oyster. The oyster, unable to get rid of it, begins coating it, resulting in the production of a beautiful pearl. Faithful witness by Christians in the face of injustice have produced beautiful results, deep rooted changes in society. In the face of fierce opposition at the outset, we have seen the abolition of slavery in Europe and America, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's, figures such as Desmond Tutu in the fight against apartheid.

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In John's Gospel, Jesus describes himself as the 'Good Shepherd'. The word that we translate as 'good' is *καλός*, means literally 'beautiful, attractive'. I am the Good Shepherd, I am the beautiful, the attractive shepherd. There was something beautiful, something attractive about the ministry of Jesus that drew people to him.

Even when we challenge those around us, ask fundamental questions of our modern society, even when we cause offence, may there be something beautiful, something attractive, about our lives as Christians that seeing us, hearing us, simply being with us; people may be drawn to find in Jesus the way that leads to eternal life.