

“Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof; but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.” (Matt. 8.8)

This week, the province of New Brunswick has begun its consultations about the future of bilingual education in the English school system. This is a topic that has many folks fired up, on both sides of the question. But what this debate shows is that some divisions run deep – in this case the language divides between New Brunswick’s English and French-language speakers. This is not something new in this province, and I know this personally. My great grandmother, as a young Acadian woman was often reminded that she had a responsibility to produce children so that her culture and language had a fighting chance. One result of this was that my paternal grandmother was one of 22 children, 17 of whom survived their infancy. With this notion of cultural protection ingrained in the family, the fact that my Acadian father would choose to date and marry an anglophone girl was ludicrous. He was breaking with all the norms. This was not only my family’s experience, for I grew up with the knowledge that along certain county lines, the francophones shouldn’t live on one side, or anglophones on the other, for risk of trouble.

This is just one experience, one of language. There are so many more stories like this in our world: tensions that surround language, race, and religion on a large scale, and tensions that surround social status, hair colour, or street on a smaller scale. Unfortunately, this highlights one of humanity’s flaws: our tendency to group each other into certain categories and to make assumptions about those who are in them. Some groupings may be self-inflicted, as a way of preserving a way of life, but some are inflicted by others in order to gain some power over them. The inequalities in our societies are long-standing, but that doesn’t make them right.

What I am talking about is something called the concept of “otherness”. It’s quite simple, really: it’s an “us versus them” situation, where one group is different than “us”. Maybe that’s white collar workers looking down on blue-collar tradies, or vice-versa, or people who reside in the country versus those who live in urban areas. There are so many ways that we humans like to “other” somebody else – sometimes completely unintentionally, but sometimes they are intentional.

All three of today’s lessons touch on this theme of “otherness”, so let us start from the Gospel and work our way backwards. Our Gospel, from St. Matthew, comprises of two separate events: the healing of a leper, and the healing of a centurion’s servant. The healing of the leper is somewhat mundane, but no less important: the man fell down and worshipped Jesus and asked him to heal his leprosy. Jesus does, and tells the man not to go spreading the news that Jesus healed him, but rather to go to the priest to go through the Jewish rituals of purification after defilement, as demanded by the Law. This healing follows the basic formula for healing: a problem is presented to Jesus, and he responds according to their confident faith.¹

The second episode deals with a Roman Centurion, who describes himself as a powerful man who has many men under him who will act at his every whim. He knows what power looks like, he says, so he knows that Jesus has the power to do what he asks. When Jesus says that he will go to the Centurion’s house to heal his paralyzed servant, the centurion says “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof; but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.” Jesus tells his disciples that this outsider centurion has more faith than some of their own insider Jewish people.

In both of these cases, the people dealing with Jesus are outsiders. They are “other” to the Jews. The leper is an outcast who is not allowed into the city, let alone into the synagogues. He is shunned in his sickness and forced to live a beggar’s life. The centurion is a gentile soldier, and outcast among the Jews for being part of the oppressive government’s regime and also not being

¹ Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible, Matthew 8:2-22

ethnically or religiously aligned with them. But no matter, Jesus helps those who have *faith* in him, regardless of their background. To Jesus, there is no “other” who is rejected simply for being “other”. If they believe in him, they shall reap the reward as much as any Jewish person, or perhaps more. “Go thy way, and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.”

Jesus’ example is that judging the qualities of the person who is “other” than us is not what’s important. What’s important is that the person has faith and believes in him. In the Epistle, this is what St. Paul is saying to the Romans. If somebody does evil to you, do not repay them with evil. Live in peace with all others, regardless of what they have done to you and leave space for the wrath of God, not your wrath. Paul then quotes Deuteronomy to show that God will exact his vengeance – leave it to him. But Proverbs says to be good to your enemy: feed him, give him drink. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. In summary, do not exact your vengeance on others, but have faith in God and trust in his deliverance.

The Old Testament Lesson which we heard is an illustration of this Epistle. The Prophet Elisha is at the centre of a soon-to-be raid by the Syrian army. Though Elisha’s companion was afraid of what was about to happen, Elisha had no fear because he had faith in God’s protection. Elisha asked God to open the eyes of his companion, and he saw “the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire” that was God’s protection all around and flanking the Syrian army. The young man was able to see that God was in control of it the whole time. Elisha asked God to blind the army, and in their confusion they were rounded up into Samaria and met there by the unnamed King of Israel. Their eyes were opened, and the Syrian army immediately realized that they were prisoners in the enemy city. The King of Israel, on fire by flames of war, asked the prophet if he should slay the army. Elisha responds to tell them “no”, but rather feed them and send them home just as you would hope to be treated. This gesture of good will turned the hearts of the Syrians and “they came no more on raids into the land of Israel”, the end of the story says – well, at least not until the very next verse.

The prophet, in his God-given wisdom, knew that God would do with them as God pleased. It was not up to them to treat these “others” any worse than they should their own families, God has a plan that he is enacting, and who are we to get in its way?

So, this problem we have, that of “othering” people and lumping them into groups, what a totally human problem that is. It should be none of our concern what group somebody falls in, whether we treat them well or not. It is a great plague in our society that we label and group people in the first place.

If we look at this as the Church, what do we see? It is not up to us to be the gatekeepers of the church. We are not to turn away anybody who is seeking Christ, for any reason. It is not our job, and we aren’t qualified for it. It doesn’t matter how powerful or powerless someone is, how rich or how poor, how English or how French, whether they are one race or another. These are all labels that we have made to include or exclude others. If somebody walks in the church completely naked, we will undoubtedly question it, but it is not for us to deny them any of the same dignity that we expect of ourselves. For Jesus shows us that he accepts anyone and anyone who believes in him, regardless of their background or story – what matters is faith. For access to the healing power of Jesus, for access to His promises of eternal life, the price of admission is faith in Christ and recognizing him as the Son of God.

As has been said, this season of Epiphany is all about revelations, or *manifestations* of Jesus’ true nature as the Son of God, the Christ. This week, we see Christ manifested as a miracle worker who heals at command, even for those who are not worthy, but who acknowledge him as Lord and demonstrate that they have faith in him. It is our prayer in the collect that we *do* have faith in him, and ask him to see our weaknesses and perils and to still stretch out his healing hand to be our helper and our defender. As we prepare to partake in this Eucharist of Christ’s Body and Blood let us remember that Jesus paid the ultimate price for us, and stretched out his healing hands on the cross and died so that we might be redeemed and protected from the devastation of our sin.