

Centre stage

‘How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!’ Many Christians would heartily endorse this view, expressed in Psalm 133, and value harmony not only in their homes but also among their brothers and sisters in faith.

Yet Jesus, in the Bible, is portrayed as time and again challenging unity, turning the world upside down and members of the same family against one another (Matthew 10.34-36). The first few chapters of Mark’s gospel involve not only many acts of healing but also confrontation. Sometimes these go together.

To followers of Jesus today, it may seem obvious that he was right and his opponents wrong. At the time, though, it was perhaps not so clear. It is possible to have at least a little sympathy for those who were baffled or offended by his words and deeds.

Strict observance of the sabbath was a command which, according to Scripture, was given directly by God. Even a minor infringement could be severely punished. When Jesus’ followers appear to be breaking the sabbath, religious leaders point this out to him. His response that the famous David and his companions went even further when they were in need for food, and that the sabbath was made for humankind not humankind for the sabbath, is less than conciliatory (Mark 2.23-28).

Things come to a head in a place of worship. Even today, in churches and chapels, worshippers’ sense of the sacred is often unconsciously bound up with maintaining order. However generous or open-minded we may think we are, we may take offence if (sometimes unwritten) rules are broken. So when Jesus heals a man in a synagogue on the sabbath, it is not hard to imagine the reaction from those who are already suspicious of him.

‘Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored’ (Mark 3.1-5, New Revised Standard Version).

It is also possible to sympathise with the man with the withered arm himself, for whom coming forward and drawing attention to himself might have been an uncomfortable experience. He might have been used to being at best the object of pity if he was noticed, at worst pointed out as a warning of God’s punishment of the unrighteous and their children. He is also used to embodying impurity: those even from priestly families who had an impairment were forbidden to offer the food of God, for their presence would profane the sanctuary (Leviticus 21.16-23).

Especially if he was reliant on the goodwill of others, he might have been reluctant to stretch the limits of their tolerance by moving centre stage rather than staying at the margins. There are many, even in the modern world, who – because of disability, caste, ethnicity, social background or sexuality – stay outside places of worship or on the sidelines in faith communities. In this way they can avoid confrontation, and some learn to adapt to a position where they miss out on the benefits but also the responsibilities and ethical challenges of

those who are fully accepted. Meanwhile those at the centre have the reassurance that they themselves are, by contrast, respected by neighbours and valued by God, and can suppress their own doubts and sense of vulnerability.

Yet Jesus is willing to disrupt these carefully-ordered relationships, cause distress and anger to pious people and even risk becoming a target (Mark 3.6). The intensity of the leaders' response – they resolve to destroy Jesus – suggests that this is not simply a rabbinical dispute, even about an important issue. He has profoundly upset them, and they are determined to remove the cause of their anguish. Yet perhaps radical measures are necessary if the man with a withered hand is to recover not only his capacity to work but also his sense of himself as a beloved child of God. Not long afterwards, in Mark's account, when Jesus heals a woman who has been ill and ritually unclean for twelve years, she too is persuaded to come forward, and he publicly praises her for her faith (Mark 5.25-34).

Perhaps, too, if the kingdom of heaven is to be ushered in, others must come to see the least of their neighbours as Jesus and the Father see them, not as marginal but as beloved children of God. This may be as challenging for our own faith community as for that of Jesus, especially if we are in denial about the often subtle ways in which some people are marginalised. And it may feel presumptuous and frightening for some to come forward into the public gaze. Yet, if we can acknowledge and break free of patterns which may be comfortingly familiar but are ultimately destructive, we may experience more deeply and share more widely the fullness of life which Christ offers.

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