

Over the past month I have been reading a trilogy – *Miss Peregrin's Peculiar Children* – it was quite an adventure – and one that ended in a couple of nightmares for me. Now despite a the dark and scary nature of some of the characters it was a really good read which explores many classic themes of darkness and light, and whose version of 'common good' is really good. The books use a series of historical photos gathered from flea markets and collectors, which provide evidence for some of the story that is developing. I was really struck by a sentence of one of the characters early on, which resonated with me and our society at present, and I have been trying to think of a way to share it, without giving away the story or the plot. The main characters in the stories are a collective of people with unusual gifts who are called 'peculiar'; gifts that the story says have been present in humanity since the dawn of time. This group, and many more like them, so the story says now live in hiding away from 'normal' people. When the lead character questions why this is, he gets this response from the teacher – *until the modern eras all peoples, normal and peculiar lived side by side – people were content that there was difference even magical and mystical – at different times in history this had been challenged, however, since modern times societies in general do not cope with this level of difference and so we have been hunted or feared or locked away, or made features in sideshows. Since then we have chosen to not live in plain sight. There are still some isolated places where people do not question the unusual and it is safe, but as a rule it is not.*

I was struck by how honest this was a reflection on society – not in terms of peculiar (though it may be) but in terms of how in our so called liberal era we have become less tolerant. It was interesting that late one night this week I happened to be listening to a radio 4 programme that was exploring this very thing – have we become less tolerant of others political views when they don't agree with our own? There was another interesting article this week about if society has become less tolerant of children and young people in public places? Well I guess, like many things it depends where you stand and what you are looking for.

It's not just about cultural or political difference however where we seem to be at odd with ourselves. During the week I had lunch with a friend who is part of a parish which prides itself on being welcoming and inclusive, especially of those who have been previously excluded from the church. They commented though, that at their services, there is no one to greet you – that they sat with backs to each other – and it is clear that only the excluded are welcome. I found this an odd comment. Sometimes in our attempt to include we end up excluding others. I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing, but maybe we need to be honest with ourselves about what we are doing – creating a safe place for a small group – which is actually a good thing.

I have noticed too in my travels around the parish and beyond, a change in the last 10 years of my experience of conversations too. There was a time when people with

different political views would discuss and accept that they may have differences. Now people yell – and expect others to agree with them – there seems generally less tolerance of those who have different points of view. I suspect this happens when our own realities become blurred and confused, we try to stabilise what we know to be true for ourselves.

The exhort we heard from 1 Peter today is in many ways addressing the same problem. Peter is speaking to a new community of Christians – and given Jesus has died in their lifetimes – they are all new to this. But even within this community there are two factions. Those who had been faithful in the Jewish community who have been persuaded that their faith has evolved and Jesus is a continuation and also a new reality to this faith; and then those who have come from outside the community who have become followers of Jesus. Commentator Judith Jones suggests that Peter is addressing all of the different groups who feel excluded – whether they were Jews who had become Christians, or foreigners who had moved into the area, or natives of another region who had converted to Christianity, they were regarded by the insiders as strangers, as other, and different. 1 Peter calls them to embrace their otherness and live it out with utter commitment, seeing it not as a stigma, but as a priceless gift¹.

This might seem strange to us, but Peter is trying to help them, and we understand that God's love, God's community needs a different understanding of inclusion and interaction. Peter urges them to conduct themselves as God's children. That means modelling their behaviour and their values not after their culture or their ancestral tradition, but after God, the parent who has given them new birth.

There is some irony that some 2000 years later we are still needing to heed the same message. The sad thing is as a society in many ways we have attempted to do this, but for many inclusion has meant we have attempted to make everyone 'like us' rather than embracing the richness of God's creation and love, which means there will be difference – because God's creation is diverse.

Which brings us to our gospel story – one of the most famous and well used resurrection stories for talking about our discipleship and vision – Jesus appears to the disciples after they have returned from Emmaus and are sharing their story of this latest encounter with the risen Jesus – and still they seem surprised and apprehensive!

Cleopas and another disciple had been returning home, back to their ordinary life – saddened by the fact that their greatest hopes have not come to pass. In spite of all they knew, all the stories they could rehearse, in spite of the witness of others, they simply had not seen Jesus – nor had anyone else they knew. The prophecies of Jesus and hope of redemption grew cold and were not able to sustain them any longer.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3250

There are some walks that are longer than others -- not because of the miles or even because of the landscape, but because of the burdens. I suspect this was one of the latter type. It was a seven-mile walk, a walk you would notice in your ankles and calves. But the real path they were walking was vastly longer and more difficult -- it was the walk of hopes in shambles. It was the walk taken through the valley of disillusionment. It was a walk burdened with perhaps accusation or shame².

They are so distracted by the story that they are telling, they don't even notice that they have become part of the story of the resurrection. I suspect we may be able to recall moments in our own lives when the very thing that we are seeking, the very thing that we are trying to understand is before us all the time. Cleopas and his companion know a lot about what has happened and share with Jesus as they walk along. Their disillusionment is such they don't even realise that things have changed in their presence!

They are awakened in the breaking of the bread – in the sharing of a meal and prayer! The Eucharist is at that heart of our meeting together each Sunday for this very reason – and why as Catholics that we hold it so dear. When we stand at the table of the eternal banquet we don't only see Jesus, but Jesus lifts the veils and blinkers from our own eyes, from our own disillusionments, that we might see ourselves and those who are around us. This beauty, this honesty, and ultimately this vulnerability which strips away our preconceptions so that we might truly see.

After Jesus is made real in the breaking of the bread he vanishes from their site and they are so filled with hope and new vision that they rush back to Jerusalem to share their story with the others.

Living with eyes opened means recognizing this place we live in. And in this place, with eyes open, we can see that there is too much injustice in the world, too many people who are still excluded for being who they are, too much pain, too many left out in the cold, too many strangers still not welcome at the table – but this gives us an opportunity and a commission.

The disciples comment that while they are walking with Jesus and then in the breaking of the bread he opens their eyes, as well as their minds and hearts so they can understand the scriptures. But they had to let go of their own preconceptions to do this, and this can be quite a challenge – because sometime we are not even aware of the perceptions we think are normal until they are challenged. As we continue in the celebration of this Eastertide Jesus calls us notice what might disillusion us, what might be our preconceptions, and to allow our eyes, our hearts and our minds to be open – to all that God wants us to see – for while we have much to celebrate, we have much to see which reveals to us the kingdom of God – in all its complexity and peculiarity. Amen.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3234