



CNI

COMMENT - Unconditional love for our neighbour

- Bishop Harold Miller at New Horizon

A lot of what I say tonight will be very honest: you may like it, you may not like it, you may agree with it, you may disagree. If there is anything I say, that is not true to God's word, then forget it. But if what I say is true to God's word, then please take it to heart.

Tonight, our subject is a difficult one. In the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Here in Northern Ireland, God has truly blessed us with a missionary zeal. We have given vast amounts of money to mission and have sent out some wonderful missionaries. But we are not really very good at our own "Samaria". We do mission really locally and globally but miss major parts of Northern Ireland. Even with all our consultations about a building a shared future

and a united community, we still live in our parallel worlds and parallel tracks.

When I was about 21 years old, I was home one night from university and I was sitting at the fire with my mother and she said to me, "There is something I need to tell you." I wasn't sure what it was going to be. She said, "I need to tell you that your Grandfather was a Roman Catholic." He had died in 1912 when she was five years of age. She had worked in the Ulster Unionist headquarters all her life and she had acted as if this was a State secret.

After a long period of searching in Chicago, I eventually discovered his name Danny McGinley from Donegal asked for his death certificate from city hall. I discovered that he had been working on the railways and he had been killed in an accident. I was able to visit his grave and to honour this man who was part of my story. What kind of culture is it, where your mother has to whisper into your ear, "Your grandfather was a Roman Catholic"? Something in me cracked. I don't want to collude with that kind of culture.

Where are the places in the whole of Ireland with the highest percentage of people with no religion? The first is Bangor (21%), second is Carrickfergus and third is Newtownards. All of

them are Protestant areas! There are all sorts of issues that we have to face, but the elephant in the room is how Protestants and Roman Catholics relate together (in biblical terms the Jews and the Samaritans).

The Jews and Samaritans lived in the same geographical area but they were in parallel worlds. They generally didn't associate with one another and they looked down on each other.

A SECTARIAN SPIRIT

- ...Keeps ourselves in separate worlds
- With all the progress we have made in Northern Ireland, we are more in separate worlds than we have ever been: separate geographic worlds, sports worlds, school worlds and church worlds. As Christians we need to challenge that.
- ...Describes ourselves in a kindly way and the "other" negatively
At the height of the Troubles, when the news came on, I knew the baddies and the goodies before anyone one opened their mouths. I spent six nights down at the flag protest. It was a really sad experience. One of the saddest things of all was to hear the

words that were coming out of the lips of kids that were firing petrol bombs at houses without even knowing who was living in them. They were saying things that they had been told to say. What kind of crazy world is it where a mother brings a daughter down to see a flag protest?

- ...Sees the other as a threat rather than a potential blessing

I think sometimes we are almost afraid of our culture in Northern Ireland and to think that something from the “other side” can be a blessing. I remember standing in a large prayer meeting after those flag marches. We were praying prayers of blessing over Short Strand and the Sinn Féin politician tweeted how much he appreciated our prayers for his community!

- ...Focuses on difference rather than agreement

We can exaggerate difference rather than rejoice in the things over which we agree. We see it not only with Christians but also with Muslims. The situation can become difficult and untractable and even vitriolic. We were taught things about the Catholic church that were to do with difference but we weren't very often told about the things

they had in common. The Samaritans and the Jews both believed in Yahweh and in the coming Messiah. Catholics and Protestants have so much in common. We both embrace the entire creeds and the entire scriptures!

- ...At its worst, dehumanises and objectifies
Negative language can be dangerous. If you have ever seen the film “Hotel Rwanda” one group starts to call the other group as “cockroaches”. The spirit of Jesus takes us on the opposite trajectory

THE SPIRIT OF JESUS

- Refuses to keep in a separate world
Jesus went into Samaria. He traded in their shops. I would love to have a spirit which says, “We are not going to live in a separate world because God is a God of the whole world.” We will live out our lives in every single part of Northern Ireland in the name of Jesus because He did it. Too often we preach the Gospel only to our own kind.
- Enters into human relationship
He asked for a drink from the Samaritan

woman. He made Himself dependent on the woman. This is “shared humanity”. Our friends on the other side of the fence are better at this than we are. We Protestants like to size people up first before we decide whether we will talk to them. I think what God is asking us to do is to be open in our human relationships, in our warmth with other people and our engagement with other people and not to allow the fact that they are different to hold us back.

- Risks ‘contamination’

Jesus risked being misunderstood and condemned for His actions. It was not appropriate for Jesus to approach a woman and it was doubly inappropriate for Him to approach a Samaritan woman, especially because there were questions over her lifestyle. I do not think that the Gospel ever goes forward without us risking misunderstanding. Some of us need to say, “Lord, I am holy in you and I am not going to be contaminated by the fact that somebody is the ‘wrong’ kind of person.” Jesus shows the way!

- Allows people of threat to be people of blessing

Why does Jesus tell the parable of the

Good Samaritan? Why would He choose a Samaritan to be the person of blessing? Sometimes the person of blessing proves to be the least likely person. Jesus makes the Good Samaritan a supreme example of what it means to be a neighbour. The same thing happened with the Ten Lepers – the one who turned back to say, “Thank you” was a Samaritan. We have so much to learn from those who are different to us. An excessive blessing can come for the person you thought was your greatest threat.

- Declares a future in Christ greater than the difference

The Samaritan woman wanted to get into the usual discussion on doctrine that would take place between Jew and Samaritan. Jesus spoke of a different future and revealed Himself as the promised Messiah. The very people who we don't meet with, are often more open to the love and good news of Jesus Christ than many in our own communities. God help us, if we decide to put boundaries on the gospel by ignoring people who can be blessed by the gospel and who will bless us with their response to the gospel. We need to be prepared to fill in that missing

square in the jigsaw. (Jerusalem... Judea...
????... the ends of the earth)

A prayer: Lord, has there been any spirit of
Sectarianism in me that I want to ask for
forgiveness in me? Is there any person that I
consider the enemy? Keep me from placing
limits and boundaries on your love! Your love is
unconditional!

*- Address given by Bishop Harold Miller of Down
& Dromore at New Horizon, Coleraine, August 5,
2015*