

Status markers ...

... do not belong in the Kingdom of God

A sermon given on the Tenth Sunday of Trinity 21st August 2022 by the Associate Vicar the Revd Wendy Wale in Beverley Minster

Hebrews 12:18-end; Luke 13:10-17

About 20 years ago, I went away on a weekend and it was a weekend of training before I went to live abroad. From the moment that we arrived at the training centre, we were plunged into a new and different reality. Instead of talking to us about living and working across cultures, we were 'made' - I use that word because I wasn't keen at the beginning to experience it - we weren't actually able to participate in the weekend until we'd obtained an entry visa which involved navigating people and processes that began to undo everything we thought we knew about how to live, how to negotiate what we needed and utterly deconstructed our ideas about how fair systems operated. I should add that I had done a full week's work and then driven around the M25 on a Friday night before I arrived, so I was not the happiest bunny when all this took place. But I eventually got my visa after much grumbling and complaining, and that enabled me to take part in the weekend, which was an entire series of tasks, each given without explanation until they were finished.

The one that had perhaps the most profound impact on me and why I'm still talking about it 20 years on involved 'status markers'. You need to imagine - each person was given a blank piece of A4 paper pinned on their chest and the task was simply to collect six coloured discs to stick on our paper. The more discs, the higher your status. The rules were simple: you queue up and when you get to the front of the queue, somebody will give you a disc to stick on your sheet. You then go to the back of the queue and you start again until you filled up your sheet. You then have the highest status. Simple. Fungate. I liked this one until they added some extra rules, which was this: if you had more syllables in your surname than the person in front of you, you could overtake them in the queue. Think about that for a moment. Think about your surname. My surname at the time was Brown. One syllable. I was on a weekend with people from all around the world, including several people from Africa and Eastern Europe, whose surnames had four or five or more syllables. One by one, they all overtook me very quickly and I was stuck at the back of the queue with

all the other monosyllable names. No discs, no chance of ever moving up the queue and gaining the much coveted red discs. No chance of achieving any kind of status. Being bored, we started to look around for something else to do while we were waiting, because we knew there was no part for us in this game. And after a while we noticed in a corner at the other side of the room, had appeared a new table with new discs, blue ones. And there was a queue where no privilege counted. Brilliant. We had something to do. We started collecting blue discs, having no idea whatsoever if they were as good as red discs, if there'll be any use. But we were very pleased to have something to do.

At the end of the activity, we would all sit down and debrief, starting on how we had felt during that experience, what had frustrated us or delighted us. You can imagine the people with the longest surnames thought it was the best activity ever. The rest of us were highly perplexed and very keen to know if our blue discs would mean anything. Each of the tasks had been based in real lived experience of those who spent their lives working in different countries and cultures. What we'd been invited to reflect on was how those with nothing to lose, like me, were the first to try anything new that was on offer. Those who are winning in the existing system are highly resistant to anything new. Those with five red discs were not going to queue up for a blue one. Very determined not to lose the high status that they'd been asked to achieve and they had secured. We also talked about what status markers are in different cultures. Not always so obviously worn on the chest, but sometimes they are. How many cars or cows you own, how many wives you have, or tattoos on your body, what your salary is, or how many houses you own, how many children you can produce, or the number of medals - perhaps a direct comparison. Every culture everywhere has its discs, its status markers.

I was reminded of this experience when I was reflecting on our readings this morning. Quite dense ones on a first hearing. But both of them at their heart are speaking about what happens when Jesus comes and proclaims a new system. If you like, a blue disc table, the kingdom of God, a different and fairer way of doing things, a disruption of the status.

In our gospel reading, Jesus is in the synagogue where the leaders benefited most from a particularly strict interpretation of the law, one that kept them very well supplied with red discs. High status, power and control, often at the expense of

others. Jesus is in the middle of teaching and probably debating with the leaders, and he suddenly stops and does what happened to us on that weekend. He stops preaching and he acts something out. He gets people to experience what he's talking about.

He notices a no-status woman, a long-term disabled woman, one who would be constantly at the back of the queue with no way of moving forwards. 18 years of being unable to stand up straight, no doubt in pain, unable to work or support herself or her family. We don't get to know the details. What matters here, what we do get to know, is that Jesus touches her and she is immediately healed and, delightedly, begins praising God.

In contrast, the leaders of the synagogue are furious. On the surface, because Jesus has broken the rules and healed on the Sabbath, day (blues don't count as much as reds). But deeper than that, because Jesus is threatening the very system that keeps their position unchallenged, keeps them in power, keeps their chest full of red discs. And to make matters worse, Jesus then calls them out publicly, "You hypocrites. Each of you will untie your animal on the Sabbath to give it a drink. Do you wish to treat this woman, this human being, this person who is also tied up, crippled and in pain with less humanity and compassion than your donkey?" Jesus isn't rejecting the law - far from it. But he's challenging the use of the law for power and control. The law was intended to set people free. The problem at the heart of the synagogue, of Israel, of all of us, if we're honest, is the temptation to tie things up rather than to set them free.

The letter to the Hebrews focuses on the passage that we heard read this morning, focuses on the Kingdom of God, of the new covenant that Jesus's life and death bring into being. The passage contrasts the old order, which is described as darkness and gloom and fear and terror (what happens when people get tied up in human structures of control) with Mount Zion, the City of God, the Promised Land, all images of the new covenant, of a kingdom that cannot be shaken, where freedom looks like human value and worth, justice and mercy. The old order will be shaken away and the Kingdom of God will reign.

Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear these passages, I tend to put myself in the crowd, cheering Jesus on, delighted and slightly smug about what happened. I'm delighted about the woman's freedom and I wish our world was a more fair and just

place. But if I'm honest, if we're honest this morning, we all have our red discs, our markers that give us status and power. It's how the world works. We all have titles and qualifications and salaries and possessions, roles and experiences, friends and families, all of which make us who we are, give us our status. None, of course, of which are wrong, but like the red discs, those so focused on the task in front of them that it can stop them from seeing the people and the situations that are overlooked but can't join in, that are utterly powerless.

I wonder today, who are the people who are still bound up, crippled by our perceptions of poverty or disability or skin colour or gender or sexuality or social status? We can be tempted to resist any change that might reduce our status, fearing that if others are noticed, we might become the overlooked and the forgotten at the back.

But we too all will have situations where we find ourselves at the back, unable to negotiate a way forward, desperately needing someone to see us, to let us in the queue. I watched a documentary about Heathrow Airport, and it could have been the NHS. It could be any one of our struggling systems and a lady desperate to get back to South Africa for a funeral, crying out to any official, "Can you help me?" She felt helpless and powerless, and the queue for her freedom to the aeroplane was disappearing without her.

Jesus was crucified because he threatened the ruling powers, disrupted the status quo. We, of course, would much rather identify with the woman who needed lifting up than the rulers who defended the status. But let us be honest and brave - we are both at the same time. And let us be willing to recognise our status markers, to hold them lightly, to step back and to look around and to see which are the people who are getting left behind, even within our church, those whose situation Jesus wants to step in and transform.

And let us then ask for the help to surrender our power to the subversive power of God and like the letter to the Hebrews, let us give thanks, offer our worship with reverence and awe and play our part in the unshakable kingdom of God.

Reading Texts

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Hebrews 12:18-end

¹⁸ You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰ (For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.') ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.' ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly* of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. ²⁵ See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.' ²⁷ This phrase 'Yet once more' indicates the

removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe;* ²⁹ *for indeed our God is a consuming fire.*