

Ordinary 7 24/02/19 Luke 6:27-38

In 1998 a month after the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa opened, a small art work caused a very large controversy. You may remember it, The Virgin in the Condom. It was 7.5 centimetres high and not very wide, but it caused a huge commotion right around the country. The situation became so tense that 7 people were arrested for violent protests.

The artwork itself was attacked on several occasions with people trying to destroy or damage it.

The work formed part of an exhibition of rising British artists, and the offending creative in this instance was a young woman named Tania Kovat.

Tania wanted to use her work to air her concerns about the Catholic Churches treatment of women, sexuality, contraception and abortion. And she did that in the best way she could, with an artistic and creative work.

Now it would be fair to say that some folk, especially some Christian folk found this artwork deeply offensive, even calling for some religious authorities to be sacked for not taking a strong enough stand against such an occurrence. It would also be fair to say that some folk, even Christian folk found it provocative and moving, and a great declaration of truth. A chance to think about the issues.

Whatever our stance on the Virgin in the Condom I think we can say that it was an extreme way of making a point. An extreme way of drawing attention to an issue. An extreme way of getting our message across.

And this idea of using extremes to make a point is important when we come to our gospel reading for this morning.

Some commentators would say that our text for today is not meant to be taken literally, and I have to say thinking about this reading in "our context" of the parish of Howick in 2019, I would have to agree.

It's not about having to live in a continual state of being physical beaten, having your stuff taken, and having to give away every good thing that you have ever worked for like your house, or your car or your boat, because someone asks you for it.

But it is in fact part of a much bigger story that Luke is wanting to share with us. That Jesus comes to proclaim God's outrageous hospitality, and these words are one of Luke's ways of painting an extreme picture to move his readers along.

Luke wants us to see that Jesus comes to move us from the religious mean spiritedness of exclusion to an outrageously open-hearted hospitality.

So, like the artist he was, he makes several extreme and radical points to move his followers along. And like Tania Kovat and artists throughout all history who push the boundaries, people didn't like it.

Jesus tells them; Don't be like those around you. Don't be mean spirited or exclusive; not with your goods or yourself...but especially not with God.

Love your enemies.

Don't be violent.

Share what you have.

Be merciful. Be forgiving. Don't judge.

Don't condemn.

Think about what it would mean to you, if you needed some outrageous hospitality, and someone denied it.

Do for other people, what you would want them to do for you.

Do for other people, what God has done for you.

It is in this context I think that much of what Jesus says and does makes sense.

Jesus proclaimed an open, inclusive and public God, mediated by God's Spirit.

His opponents proclaimed a hidden, exclusive and private God, mediated by those in power.

It would be fair to say that these opponents found Jesus, his sayings and his actions deeply offensive.

And they killed him, for them.

This open hearted and outrageous hospitality preaching and acting got Jesus murdered.

It got his followers murdered.

Then it got his followers murdering one another. Religious exclusivism and mean spiritedness is a serious business. People have been tortured for heresy. Burnt at the stake. Drowned in ponds and rivers. All because they believed God was a little different, a little bigger, a little bit more generous, than those in power.

Today that spirit still excludes people from the church. From offices and positions in the church. From membership in the church. From participation in the body of Christ.

In many places, women are excluded. In even more places, children are excluded. People from non-dominant ethnicities, disabled people, are excluded, and you know the rest.

So Jesus says to us, again, to stop, to look, to listen and not to be dull of mind...to make sure that the spirit of religious exclusiveness and mean spiritedness is far from us...and that instead, we are to be outrageously hospitable.

So Jesus tells us.....

To love our enemies.

To not be violent.

To share what we have.

To be merciful. Be forgiving. Don't judge. Don't condemn.

To be generous in all things as God has been generous to us.

To do for other people, what God has done for us.

Because God is generous, and God is good.

Amen.