

Baptism Sermon

In a world of religious bigotry, natural suspicion, obsession with security, being open-minded is seen by many as the cardinal virtue. But open-mindedness is the virtue that Christians lack, because we – especially as Baptists – have made up our mind, deliberated, and decided to be followers of Jesus. From now it's closed-minded certainty all the way to the grave. At least this is how we are often perceived, and usually with good cause.

But I have to say, those who shout loudest about the need to be open minded, are often as closed minded as the most conservative of the bible-thumping merchants of certainty. It is one thing to say that we are open minded. It is quite another to encounter a person who threatens stuff about us that we hold precious. It is one thing to bleat about being open minded. Quite another to allow your experience with another person to change who you are.

This is largely what happens at baptism. It is not that we have achieved open mindedness so that we can make objective decisions about life, the universe and everything. It is that we encountered Christ, and receive Christ – as Ruth has said. And the Christ that we receive spells disruption in our lives. Beautiful, painful, liberating, disturbing, disruption.

And who knows in advance the difference that committing to Christ will make. And that is as true of any person to whom we commit. We commit ourselves to receive from them, and as we give ourselves to them, to receive ourselves back from them as different people. That, it seems to me, is a far more humane way of relating than pretending that we can achieve some mythical state of open mindedness.

There is a Guardian article this week that tries to show how our brains cannot cope with change, how we cannot be open minded in reality. It goes on to explain how, even though the greatest threat to threaten the human race is no longer military but ecological, our greatest resources are ploughed into building tanks. The rational thing to do is to stop building tanks and commit our resources to addressing climate chaos. But George Monbiot's article simply tries to show how our brain works, and assumes that human beings are simply rational beings.

If open mindedness is the cardinal virtue, it presupposes that we are simply rational – mind-driven beings. But we think and feel and act not only with our minds, but with our bodies, our emotions, our spirits. I learned this as a boxer. When you are in a boxing ring – your body has been trained to think for itself. If you try to offer a rational, reasoned response to the punch that is approaching your chin at high speed, even if your mind is quicker than mine – it won't be long before you mind goes black and fizzy! Your whole body thinks and responds and feels and shapes your actions.

It is as true in human relationships! How often are we genuinely driven by a merely rational robotic way of dealing! I'm sure that would be described as a disorder. I think it was Pascal who said that the heart has reasons that the mind knows not of. –

This is not to say that we are irrational beings – but that our ways of thinking and living are not simply based upon our mind being open to cope with different options. To live as rational beings, we engage our heart and our mind and our spirit and our body and our relationships. That is why, as Jill is Baptised, it is the whole person who is baptized. Down into a watery grave, out into a new way of life. That is the language of resurrection.

That is how the bible reading worked – a woman with a 12 year old hemorage, an excluded woman is restored to the community, slap band in the middle of a story about a 12 year old girl being raised from the dead. The point being, that when people are healed and restored and remade – that is when resurrection happens. When Jesus touches this woman, he should have been rendered ritually impure, he should have been contaminated by her uncleanness. But nobody accuses him of that, because his resources of new life cascade from him with the force of a waterfall, a force that this woman receives into her life and finds herself changed.

Jill is committing to a way of life that is based upon this resurrection, upon a daily encounter with this Christ. A daily baptism, as we receive Christ ever more fully, and find ourselves ever more fully transformed into his image. A new way of life, based not on some mythical fairy tale of open mindedness, but on the daily manifestation of resurrection life. In the name of Christ, I dare you to receive this Christ in that way.

Jairus comes, as the epitome of all that is privileged, and successful and respectable. The woman comes as an outcast – even those who brushed up against her were rendered ritually unclean.

Middle class people, hate hearing stuff they didn't already know! I don't mean football results and share prices.