

The TV programme “Shop well for less” was trying to help a family of 7 cut down their bills by not buying branded goods. They were very successful except when it came to football shirts. Father and son (11) had at least 20 Arsenal shirts and kit worth over £700 but when offered a cheaper alternative without the Arsenal logo the youngster said “How will people know which team we support?” Walk through Carlisle or any major town on a Saturday and you will see how important this is to hundreds of men, women and even babies!

The question of how to be different, how to be distinctive and show whom you support goes far beyond sport. The political debate this August has been dominated by it. Should Muslim women wear distinctive top to toe clothing? Should some even wear the niqab and totally cover their faces? Do we in multicultural Britain accept this as the price of freedom or do we ridicule them as looking like a pillar box? Hardly a helpful contribution to discussion. And on other side of the divide how do we speak about Jewish people in a way that is not anti-Semitic? Even if we have grave questions about Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian people, how do we allow people to live their lives and preserve their ethnicity without becoming prey to latter day Nazi groups?

And further afield this week, we have seen the United Nations charge the government of Myanmar of the ethnic cleansing of the Rohinja people, driving them from their homes with appalling violence. It seems as humans that we long to be distinctive yet have a deep fear of people who are different from us. How to be different is a question that runs through the Bible. In the midst of constant attack by Philistines, Assyrians and Babylonians and pressure to conform to the cultural ways of Greeks and now in Jesus’ day, Romans, the children of Israel wrestled with the question how could they be distinctive. How could they demonstrate that they were God’s holy people, be seen to be different from the pagans around them? Some chose safety and kept their heads down. Others became ever more extreme in their observance of the Law of Moses. They tried to fulfil all the hundreds of injunctions and rules that had grown up over the centuries about what food they could eat, what they should wear and what rituals needed to be observed in their daily life.

So the Pharisees in our Gospel note that Jesus and his disciples don’t observe the strict code of ritual washing before meals. Nothing to do with hygiene, it was over the next 100 years to be a complicated procedure washing first down from the fingers to elbow and then from elbow to fingers with an eggcup of ritually pure water. It was all about being pure before God and therefore standing out from the pagans around.

And what does Jesus say about how to be distinctive? It is quite difficult to follow both because our Gospel reading omits much of Mark’s narrative and because Mark is writing some 30 or 40 years on for a non-Jewish audience who have never heard of these customs.

However, I think we can draw two main ideas from Jesus’ teaching. First that being distinctive as God wants is not about being defensive. It is not about corralling the wagons to fight off the enemy. It is not about ever stricter observance of the law so that you stand in complete contrast to your neighbours. We can read Jesus teaching throughout the Gospel that God loves everyone without distinction, good, bad and indifferent. It is not about keeping the Law to the nth degree because all people are of equal value before God. It is this **radical** view of what it is to be distinctive that so angers his hearers and leads to his death. Yes, he is only echoing the words of Isaiah and Micah and other OT prophets, yet at a time of national crisis the pressure to be different, to stand and

be counted means his call to recognise that there is room in God's kingdom for everyone is regarded as treason.

How relevant that is to us at a time of national crisis today that we don't go down the narrow way but make room for all; leaver and remainer, Jew or Palestinian, Muslim and Christian, Conventioneer and atheist. City or United or Arsenal, all will be there in God's kingdom and so we too need to make room for them.

The second strand of Jesus teaching comes in the final verses of our Gospel. Here the focus has changed to what foods are ritually clean and Mark records that Jesus argues that it nothing to do with what goes into the mouth but what comes out of a person that makes them unclean before God Quote vv 21, 22.

But we who have been thinking together over the past 4 weeks about receiving Jesus the Bread of Life might say that this is a what also marks us out as God's different holy people. We are not through his grace people who thief or murder or are envious or full of pride. These things are not part of the Christian character, not part of what God looks for in his people. This is what makes the current uncovering of sexual abuse in the Catholic and Anglican churches so awful not only because of the damage done to Christ's little ones but because such things should not even be thought of by clergy or laity. They place a huge shame upon us all and it is good that at last action is being taken at every level to wake up. If we want to be truly different, truly distinctive in the world so that we draw people to see the living Lord and get to know his love, then we need to ask the Holy Spirit to so fill us that the list of negatives are turned on their heads and we are seen to be people who:

Value the sacredness of our sexual relationship,

Protect other's property and rights,

Uphold the sanctity of life

Preserve our lifelong partnership

Are content with what we have

Work to affirm goodness

Always speak the truth

Enjoy life with moderation

Are delighted in another's good fortune

See the best in others

Deepen a sense of humility

And looking carefully at the world around us.

Now if we were people like that, we would truly be God's holy different people and the world would be a better place and there'd be no need for Arsenal shirts...perhaps!