**Signposting Jesus**: Talk for St James Bolton by Sally Sutcliffe 19.7.20

(based on the readings Acts 10:9-29, 34-35 and 2 Corinthians 3:1-5.)

Today’s theme in our series of the Church Unleashed is: The Church Unleashed as Sign. Are you familiar with the signboard in the church garden? Have you noted what it says? *Jesus: hope for our community: Meet Him here!* When I look at that I feel challenged. The sign points to Jesus. Yes, I believe Jesus is hope for our community. He brings peace, salvation and joy. But the next phrase is bold: Meet Him here. I ask myself, will people who walk in off the street meet Jesus here? How could that be?

Saint Teresa of Avila lived in the 1500’s and wrote: ‘Christ has no body now but yours; no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which He sees, yours are the feet with which He walks, yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world.’

We are called not just to be a sign, *pointing* to Jesus, but we are called to *represent* him,even to *embody* him here where we are. A tall order, and one for which we desperately need His Holy Spirit. There are all sorts of strange representations of Christianity in today’s society and on TV, often nothing to do with Christ, so when people reject the Christian faith they are often rejecting a distortion of the faith rather than Christ himself. So it’s up to us to point out the reality of Christian living, based on holiness, love, grace and forgiveness. We need to embody the true Christ. 1 Peter 1:22 gets to the nub of it: ‘You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters.’ And the song reminds us: ‘They’ll know we are Christians by our love.’ Are we this kind of sign at church and in our everyday lives? Do we vaguely point people in His general direction, or do we actually embody Jesus as hope for our community? As a church do we do what it says ‘on the tin’?

Many say St James is a friendly and welcoming church, which is great. It’s a great start. But can we scratch a bit deeper and dare to ask some more penetrating questions of ourselves? Are we truly inclusive, both towards each other and newcomers, or does our love only go so far? Peter and his fellow Jewish followers of Jesus were quite happy with their comfortable, small view of church – the Messiah had come for the Jews and surely that was Good News enough? And anyway, brought up as devout Jews, the early Jewish church still thought they couldn’t associate with Gentiles, as they would be defiled if they came into contact with them and ate their food. So how on earth could a Gentile become a Jesus follower? As we read in Acts 10, it takes a very vivid vision of ritually unclean animals on a large white sheet to jolt Peter out of his unconscious bias towards his own Jewish people. It comes as quite a shock to realise that ‘God has no favourites’ and that Gentiles are just as precious to God as Jews.

Do I, do we, like Peter, unconsciously think that church is for ‘church people’ only and harbour any preconceived ideas about people who aren’t like us? If someone who was street homeless came in one day, would we treat them the same as, say, a visiting preacher? If a young person on drugs or an alcoholic came in and sat at the back, how would we react? If a rap artist in dreadlocks joined us one morning, how would we feel? And if someone from another faith came in because they’d seen a vision of Jesus and wanted to know more, would we become family to them, maybe even taking them into our own home if their own family rejected them? (does this last example ring any bells for us at St James?). What vision from the Lord might *we*need to break down the barriers in our thinking? How might ‘Cornelius the outsider’ be a challenge to us ‘insider Peters’?

It’s so interesting that so often with God the outsider is one step ahead of the insiders. What I mean by that is that often in the Bible God uses those considered beyond the pale, outside the camp, the non-believers (in this case the Gentiles) to show up the people of God, the insiders, the believers, (in this case the early Jewish church). It’s Gentile Cornelius who has the vision first, but then secondly Peter also needs a vision to enable him to share the Good News with this man whom Peter would have thought beyond God’s grace. But God is already working in Cornelius’ life; the angel tells him: ‘God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor’. God sees Cornelius’s heart and knows that he is a genuine man, seeking after the truth. But the church is actually a stumbling block to him finding Jesus!

So the point of the vision is that Jesus didn’t just come for the Jewish nation but also for the peoples of the whole world. The Good News is far better and broader and more radical than they had realised! But it takes a while for the penny to drop fully. As Steve explained in last week’s sermon, even after accepting that the Gospel was for ALL people including Gentiles, they still needed to think through whether the new Gentile believers should follow their old Jewish tradition of circumcision. They finally realised that bodily circumcision was not essential after all, but circumcision of the heart definitely was.

And before Peter could point people to Jesus, before he could be a sign or a letter from Christ, he needed a change of heart. The verse at the end of Psalm 139 has always challenged me: ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; test my thoughts.  Point out anything you find in me that makes you sad, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.’

And sometimes it will take an outside source to test our thoughts and reveal our unconscious biases or prejudices we don’t realise we harbour. The outside source might be an angel, a vision, a TV programme, a movement like Black Lives Matter, a Bible verse, a sermon or a friend. Let’s not shrink from being willing to acknowledge where we have had or still have wrong attitudes, and where we may be a roadblock stopping people finding Jesus rather than a sign pointing to Him. We know the saying: Be patient with me, God hasn’t finished with me yet! But have we let Him *start* on us?

So during this week let’s do a bit of a spiritual review: Do we as a church point to Jesus? Do we believe He embodies hope for our community? Do we embody that hope? Are we hope-bringers? Are we his love letter to Bolton? Do we love without prejudice or condition? Are we a ‘letter from Christ, written not with pen but with the Spirit of the living God?’ (from our 2 Corinthians reading). Not on tablets of stone (or computer tablets or i-pads) but engraved on people’s hearts? Not just dead words but living actions?

The penny finally dropped for Peter that the Gentiles could become followers of Christ without first having to become Jews and follow those laws. Of course we don’t need that penny to drop for us, do we? Or do we? What ways of doing things might we unconsciously expect people who’ve never been to church before to adopt when they do dare to step into church? And have you ever thought, without Peter losing his long-standing prejudice, none of us Gentiles here in Britain would have ever known about Christ? And that you are the only Bible many people will ever read - the only ‘letter of recommendation’ as Paul puts it?

So let’s think when we step out into our week, what kind of letter about the Lord Jesus does our life write?