

Year C

Galatians 6: 1-16

During our holiday in Seville in March, Annie and I visited the Maestranza bull ring. It is said that it is the most beautiful bull ring in Spain, second in importance only to Madrid. It houses a museum in tribute to the history of bull fighting in Spain. It has pictures and photographs of legendary bull fighters and specimens of their extravagant capes in display cases. It is full of colour and glamour but it cannot hide the unsavoury fact that much cruelty and some tragedy has

occurred within its walls over the years. Many bulls have been needlessly sacrificed in a cruel way and some of the lauded matadors have lost their lives too.

José Cubero, one of Spain's most brilliant matadors, only 21 years old, had been enjoying a spectacular career. However, in a 1958 bullfight, José made a tragic mistake. He thrust his sword a final time into a bleeding, delirious bull, which then collapsed. Considering the struggle finished, José turned to the crowd to acknowledge the applause. The bull, however, was not dead. It rose and lunged at the unsuspecting

matador, its horn piercing his back and puncturing his heart. He died instantly.

Just when we think we've finished off pride, just when we turn to accept the congratulations of the crowd, pride stabs us in the back. We should never consider pride dead before we are.

The theologian, A.J. Conyers wrote: “All religion, and every practice of religion, and in fact all of human life is in danger of being marshalled into the service of the human ego.”¹

¹ Conyers, A.J. 1999 The Loss of Transcendence and its Effects on Modern Life South Bend: St. Augustine's Press p. 131

That's the danger that Paul witnessed in Galatia as with horror he witnessed a dominant group of Christians imposing their way or no way on the others. Paul in his letter, used every device he could draw on from logic, through emotional appeal and even sarcasm to challenge the circumcision party in the church to think again: to stop thinking about themselves and to consider the others. How sad it is that a particular preference among a group of people can become the be-all and end-all, and so the core of meaning is lost. That's what happened in Galatia as some of the Jews of

Christian faith lifted their cultural bias for circumcision above the love of Jesus for Jew and Gentile alike. What is it in human nature that leads us to focus on tangible secondary issues at the expense of what really matters?

Jean Vanier, the founder of the l'Arche community has recently died. Vanier served in the Royal Navy during the War. He wrote about that experience: "When I was in the navy, I was taught to give orders to others. That came quite naturally to me! All my life I had been taught to climb the ladder, to seek promotions, to compete, to be the best, to

win prizes. That is what society teaches us. In doing so, we lose community and communion.”

Later, after the war, he experienced a Christian conversion. Moved by the plight of disadvantaged people with disabilities he moved into “L’Arche” a house so simple that there was no toilet, only a bucket, and no electricity. He brought three men with disabilities home from an institution to live with him. The community grew and got noticed. In 1966, the L’Arche community traveled together to Rome for an audience with Pope Paul VI, who declared, “Seeing you

all together makes me realise that you are a small group united by love and an active will to help one another. You are a community in whose midst Jesus is happy to live.”²

Isn't that a wonderful affirmation? - “a community in whose midst Jesus is happy to live”! What a contrast to the mess in Galatia. In essence, the contrast between Galatia and L'Arche is simple to analyse. If the focus is on the other, in loving care, then there is no issue with secondary matters. The fact that people were not physically or mentally able to perform certain tasks was completely

² <https://apprenticeship-to-jesus.wordpress.com/2015/06/08/jean-vanier/>

irrelevant for Jean Vanier. He wrote: “I was touched by these men with mental handicaps, by their sadness and by their cry to be respected, valued and loved.”³ When that cry was heard and responded to, something wonderful was born - a community of the risen Christ.

What millstones do we tie around people’s necks? It will not do to confine the Galatian problem to the history books - some irrelevancy about ancient circumcision practices. It is absolutely about who we are. Do we believe that in Christ the old has

³ <https://apprenticeshiptojesus.wordpress.com/2015/06/08/jean-vanier/>

fallen away and the new creation is emerging? We have no business cultivating the old! It is very important that Christians have a forward-looking perspective. We know where the story of this world is going and that knowledge should be drawn upon to influence the present. God is calling us from insular preoccupation to generous fellowship in the remarkable diversity of community. When Jesus announced that the mission of God was moving from Jerusalem to all nations, he declared God's embrace and welcome of human diversity. The people of God were going to look very different from

now on. That proved to be a very difficult thing to accept for many.

I still cringe when I remember the group of young people with glue stiffened, coloured hair, tattoos, nose and lip piercings, being turned away from the door of the church because the welcoming committee didn't like the look of them. Their difference led to their exclusion from the acceptable gathering of God's people. No-one questioned the decision to ask them to leave. It was obvious that they should not be admitted to a respectable church gathering. I still cringe because I know that my impulse to exclude

is still there. I want to keep the markers of exclusion still in place even though I know that is abhorrent to God. Then I remember Conyer's note: "all religion... is in danger of being marshalled into the service of the human ego." The problem does not lie with others and how they look or are, the problem lies with me, with us.

"Let us build a house where love can dwell
and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell how
hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock
of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions. All
are welcome, all are welcome,
all are welcome in this place."⁴

⁴ Haugen, Marty

May that be our mantra today. Amen.