



Bristol Cathedral

**A Sermon preached at Evensong 14th July 2013
By the Dean**

Marking the Boundaries (Mark 7:1-23)

A few days ago I had a conversation with Canon Wilby. She was in the midst of writing her final sermon. The sermon she preached in the cathedral this morning. It was a difficult sermon to write, the last sermon, the final word.

And it was that *final* word that was the problem. It was a problem because it is not the final word at all. Canon Wilby was not parcelled up and put in a box this morning, she was not switched off. Her life and ministry continue with all sorts of possibilities and challenges to come and the life of the cathedral which, in one form or another, has been rolling like a river for nearly nine hundred years, rolls on.

Tonight as academic term ends and as choristers and lay clerks and choral scholars leave us it that same challenge of reaching an ending that is not an ending at all. It is a *significant* moment for them and us. Relationships change, but it is not really an ending and final words are out of place. We like endings and beginnings. They are neat, all those lines in the sand, and points of no return, the burnt boats, crossed rubicons and clear blue water. We are big on endings, and on fresh starts, new beginnings. We like life to be tidy, we like to put mistakes behind us; we like to keep things in different boxes. I think it may be a mistake. Just think about that gospel reading we heard: the argument about what you eat and what defiles you. It sounded a bit technical, a bit inaccessible. In truth it was a simple, striking point that was being made.

Just behind me when I sit at my desk, there is a row of books about Jesus. One says he is a revolutionary, another that he was Martyr, Lord, and Messiah, another says he was a Jew, another promises to tell me about the historical Jesus and yet another declares that he was divine. There are a lot more books that say it is much more complicated than that and that Jesus is really hard to describe. Jesus himself did not make it easy, the parables are very often riddles, they were meant to leave you with a question. At critical points Jesus was silent and said nothing, and at other times he seemed to suggest part of the truth was a secret. He gave few commands, left precious few instructions. Jesus was not tidy and slips our definitions.

One thing though he made clear. Again and again Jesus protested against the walls we build, the boundaries we make. Religious people always want to make holiness special and piety particular. It is forever something that belongs to these people and not those people, it happens here, not there; something that is for us, not them. Jesus who sat with tax collectors and ate with sinners; Jesus who spoke to the Samaritan woman and healed gentiles, Jesus who touched the possessed and the lepers kept breaking down the barriers that other imposed. Jews believed in the family, but Jesus preferred to talk about those who do the will of God. There was talk of the Temple and Jesus looked to the day when it would be destroyed. The Pharisees talked about the Law and Jesus suggested they were forever tripping over the detail. Again and again Jesus was generous, inclusive and forgiving. He did not separate, distinguish and exclude.

That is what we heard in the gospel reading. It was an argument about the rules for ritual washing, the holiness code. The Pharisees were arguing about the small print, urging a religion that made you distinct, set you apart and Jesus denounced them.

He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;

Holiness is not separation and standing apart. Religions that make outcasts; demonise gay people, make gender a major issue and build barriers around themselves, behave as though God needs defending and protecting and assume that danger is all around. Jesus reminds us that creation is in far more danger from us than we are from the good things God has given us. God does not need protecting, more often than not we need saving from ourselves.

The choristers and men who leave us today go with our thanks for all that they have given us, but without some final message as though they might need our advice or a sense that this is a critical ending. It is a sad day because there are friends we will not see so often, but it is a good day too. It is a day to remember that the God who meets us here, also walks with us where we go and waits ahead of us. It is a day to remember that there is more of truth than we know here and other kinds of holiness yet to come. Those who go beyond our walls leave in the confidence that grace and glory are out there and that Christianity is a faith in which it is the future that is exciting.

We pray for the Kingdom to come because we look to the future, to a deeper justice and a more convincing peace than anything we have seen so far in all our compromises and accommodations. Jesus knew it would be the poor and the meek who would get there first, precisely because they are not preoccupied with keeping something safe. The deep conservatism of religion is rooted in a kind of fear and possessiveness. Today we let people go, sharing their hope and grateful to be reminded that the good things we enjoy here are not the end of the story, just a glimpse of what is to come. To get to the Kingdom we will always have to break through the boundaries we have made.