

Sermon for Pride Service - St Martin in the Fields, 3rd July 2010

Giles Goddard

John 9.1-5

I was recently being interviewed for material for a play about London, and they asked me about my happiest day in London. Perhaps because today was on my mind, I immediately thought of the first Pride I ever attended – in 1986. Undoubtedly one of the happiest days. Sunny, surrounded by chums; I remember my amazement when looking back down Piccadilly and seeing thousands and thousands of LGBT people stretching back to Hyde Park. Compared with now, the numbers were tiny, but at the time it was huge. The first time I'd ever been surrounded by LGBT people all having a good time, all enjoying themselves.

The party was in Jubilee Gardens. We could all fit in. It felt like I knew almost all of them.

One of my clearest memories of that day is walking back over the Hungerford Footbridge and round the front of St Martin in the Fields, and up St Martin's Lane to get some food in, I think, the Angus Steakhouse up the road. And thinking, here I am, back to reality. And feeling quite miserable about that.

The parties grew bigger and moved out of town. Hackney, Brixton, Finsbury Park. For a long time I thought, oh, we don't need Pride - the battles have all been won. But over the last few years I've reengaged with Pride more and more. And it, in a funny way, has become more important for us, as LGBT people, even though on the surface things have got so much better.

I think there are many reasons for that. One is that we have, as a society, become more enthused about the diversity of our communities, and so we celebrate LGBT life in the same way we celebrate Asian communities or tennis. But more fundamentally, we are also as a society much more concerned about human rights, and the light of what's happening in some countries in Africa or Eastern Europe - Poland, for example – these mainly Christian countries which seem to be becoming more and more homophobic - it's even more important to celebrate LGBT life across the world.

For we have travelled, from the margins to the heart. You can see it in the way that Pride has come home, to Trafalgar Square, right at the heart of London. And you can see it in the way that St Martin's can host a Pride service. But you can also see it in the story we've just heard read.

When I looked at the readings, I was a bit taken aback. Why've they chosen a reading about healing? I thought. We're not sick; for God's sake, we've been through all that. But then I looked again, and saw that the way the paralysed man is described is as an "invalid".

In-valid. Not valid. An outsider. Sitting on his own on the edge of the pool for thirty eight years, watching everyone else go ahead of him because he has no one to help him.

And, presumably, getting more and more depressed and more and more conscious of his own apparent freakishness - being on the outside, looking in. While the pool-life structures go on around him – the competitiveness of having to get into the pool before everyone else, before the water stops moving – and therefore he's experiencing the loneliness of constant exclusion.

Until somebody comes along who loves him. Who loves him so much that astonishing, wonderful, unpredictable, miraculous things happen; things which are so good that he doesn't NEED to do what everyone else is doing, he doesn't NEED to go into the pool; the love of God, of Jesus, means that he can simply get up and walk. He is no longer an in-valid; an outsider; he is no longer on the margins; he is at the heart.

It's worth dwelling on that for a bit – this man, feeling isolated and alone, as so many of us have at times in our lives; but then, his life being completely transformed by the experience of love.

But not just any love- God's love – which means that he doesn't even have to do what everyone else is doing and enter the pool; he can simply walk tall, and be the person God created him to be. Leaving everyone else to get on with what they're doing – struggling to get into the pool instead of talking to Jesus - but the superabundance of God's love means that there is enough for them, for him, and to spare - full measure, shaken together, pressed down, running over.

I said to someone – what shall I say at the Pride service? He said - tell them God loves them. Then I asked someone else, and he said – give them Stephen Sondheim. I thought the first answer was better. So here I am, telling you that God loves you. And now, more than ever, it's important to hold on to that. Life in our churches seems to become harder and harder, and we seem to be being pushed more and more to the margins even though in society we're respected and valued more and more.

So, now, it's wonderful to remind ourselves and remember that God loves us – equally, profoundly, superabundantly. And draws us in, from the margins to the heart. We are a gift to our churches, even if sometimes they don't think that - because all expressions of God's love are a gift for the world. It's a wonderful thing to know; and it's a wonderful thing to be able to come together to celebrate that, together, all of us in our diversity, and difference, and belovedness.

I give thanks for Pride, for you, for us, and above all for the superabundant love of Jesus which liberates us to walk tall into another year.