

“Dad. Why did they build the great wall of China?” Answer - “It was to keep the rabbits out”. (Must have been big rabbits!) I love the TV advertisement, but it’s a good question. Why do we build walls? We seem to have a need not just to keep the rabbits out but people away, or keep people in their place.

Some walls you can see like the great wall of China. Our own back fences seem to be getting higher too as our yards get smaller. You can’t even see your neighbours anymore let alone talk to them. Other walls are invisible. We construct them consciously or unconsciously between ourselves and other people to protect ourselves. We all need healthy boundaries in our lives, but some invisible walls are not helpful, they unfairly divide and hurt - walls between people of race, colour, sex, age, appearance, occupation, and wealth. Walls between religions and within them. Boundaries determined by which school you go to, what circle of friends you are in, what clothes you wear, what footy team you follow. Walls of silence between husbands and wives, walls of hostility between nations and even within families. There is the glass ceiling that women perceive stops their careers from advancing the same as mens. Hilary Clinton’s supporters are blaming fact she is a woman for her loss, but if her opponent lost his supporters might blame the fact Obama is black! Where are the invisible walls in your life right now? Where have you erected them and why have you built your great wall?

Jesus lived in age of walls too. He was born a Jew and the Jews separated themselves from everyone else by rules about what you could eat and what and who you could touch. The Pharisees saw to it that the people kept them and avoided being contaminated by the big bad world. They avoided non-Jews or Gentiles, Samaritans and Romans, people guilty of particularly bad sins, lepers and the sick. They wouldn’t touch a dead body. The walls were different but in some ways they are the same. Walls of judgement, fear, superstition, and dislike, sadly often in the name of God.

Olivia Newton John walked across the Great Wall of China recently and called on friends to follow her to raise money to find a cure for cancer. Great walls, a call to follow, and healing - that’s the combination we also see in today’s Gospel as Jesus crosses high walls and boundaries to bring healing and life to people and he calls us to follow him. If the Great Wall of China is a wonder of the world, an even greater wonder is the man who broke down every wall imaginable that separates and divides people. Jesus was unconcerned about human and spiritual barriers. In today’s Gospel he touched the unclean, healed the outcast and called notorious sinners to follow him.

There was Matthew the tax man. Who here loves the tax man? – we dread a letter from him inviting us to visit him for an audit and we would never invite him to our homes for fun. In Matthew’s day many tax collectors lined their own pockets with taxes they gathered yet Jesus, looking for a new disciple comes to Matthew and says “follow me” , Matthew was called to the inner circle of disciples! No spiritual credentials, but Jesus calls him anyway. Then he goes to dinner with Matthew and they are joined by other tax collectors and outcasts. Jesus chose to ignore the walls other people surrounded the tax collectors and other “sinners” with. Jesus didn’t tell Mathew to get his life together and then apply for membership, he called him where he was, reached out to him and accepted him where he was, calling him to **“follow me”**.

A leader of the synagogue bursts on the scene and begs Jesus to come and touch his dead daughter. Death is like an impenetrable wall that cuts us of from our loved ones. The ultimate barrier. We can’t see or contact them and feel separated from them. Anyone touching a body back then was rendered unclean and untouchable themselves for a period. How many of us would like to touch a dead body? **“Come and place your hands on her and she will live”** he begs. Jesus gets up and goes with him. He ignored the taboos we have about death.

Along the way he was confronted by a woman with an embarrassing bleeding problem. She had it for 12 years. Embarrassing health problems threaten to cut us off from our worshipping community. Who wants to come to church if you have uncontrollable bodily fluids of any kind! Her bleeding problem made her unclean in her society and church. She was isolated, and noone would touch her. She snuck up behind Jesus and touched him, or at least his coat, believing that **“if I only touch his cloak I will be healed.”** Jesus does not get angry with her for touching him and making him unclean, he only sees her need to be touched and healed. Jesus turned around and said: **“Take heart my daughter! Your faith has healed you”**.

Meanwhile back at the dead girl’s house the professional mourners were like a wall around the front door. They were making morbid music and wailing loudly. Jesus asks them to leave. He said **“Go away, the girl**

is not dead, but asleep". Where Jesus is death is only a sleep. He took hold of the little girl's hand, crossing the boundary into the unclean and reached into the seemingly impenetrable realm of death and she got up. He contaminated himself with death and she received his life.

Jesus crosses walls of morality, dislike, uncleanness, fear, suspicion and superstition and death and brings healing and life and invites people to follow. He longs to touch the lives of people who need to be made whole and to let them touch him.

Now Jesus' behaviour did not go unnoticed - After Jesus had called Matthew we are told that he went to dinner with Matthew and had a meal with many other tax collectors and outcasts. Jesus is eats with the people we don't want to touch or come into too much contact with, and he is criticised for it. And what does Jesus' reply?, **"it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. Go an learn what this means : I desire mercy not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners"**. Those who are well don't need Jesus. But who is well? None of us is free from sin, least of all those won't admit it! Christians are simply sick people who admit it and are touched by the healing forgiveness of Jesus, and as his disciples we are free to touch the lives of others without being afraid we might catch something! Free to show mercy and kindness, as Jesus did and said. Free to break down a few walls of our own. When Jesus called Matthew he didn't take him to the temple to show him how to fold his hands and stand up and sit down. Lessons one two and three were about real people with real needs and showing mercy to them.

The Pharisees saw building walls and keeping boundaries as the way to keep the faith and church and themselves pure. Jesus was free to give away his life without fear of contamination. The walls we build to separate ourselves from others we don't like or differ from or are afraid of or threatened by, only indicate our own need to be made whole by Jesus. Our lack-of-love needs to be cured and only Jesus can do that. The cross is the greatest wonder of the world. It is where the walls come down between us and God and between us and people. It is where we all experience his greatest mercy.

Jesus shows that God wants to reach and heal and give life to and call all people, especially those who feel most like an outcast in society, those with desperate needs and those who feel most unclean and worthless. I had three calls the other night from an anonymous young man on drugs and into male prostitution to finance his drug habit. I have no idea why he rang me. Each time it was reverse charges.. Will you accept the call? asked the recorded voice. Over the past three days he continued to ring at any time. Each time it was going to cost me to speak to him in more ways than one, especially at 1.30am in the morning. What do you think of my life? he asked. I feel good when on drugs, does that make me a bad person? What if I can't get off the drugs? What do you think about me being homosexual? As he described his lifestyle the wall between us seemed huge. So did my inability to help him. Should I just refer him and wall him out? It is not easy to know how far you can go in helping people. We need boundaries too if we are to survive. I had to leave the phone off the hook at night just to get some sleep. But if we are serious about following Jesus then even with our limitations we at least need to be open to people whose lives we might regard us unclean, immoral, disturbing or even repulsive. We are not Jesus and can't heal like Jesus did but we can show his compassion and mercy to people. Sometimes our love has to be tough. We may have to set boundaries, we may have to tell people where to get help they need, but our aim must always be love and we must do it with compassion and mercy.

Jesus reached out to a moral outcast, he allowed a sick woman to reach out and touch him and he reached out and touched death in order to bring someone back to life. In response to Jesus a man left the security of his job, a sick woman hung on in faith, and a father believed death was not the end for his little girl. Some criticised Jesus for crossing the walls and showing mercy but many of the people who saw it went and told the world what Jesus had done.

Matthew was learning first hand what it meant to follow Jesus, what have we learnt from him today?