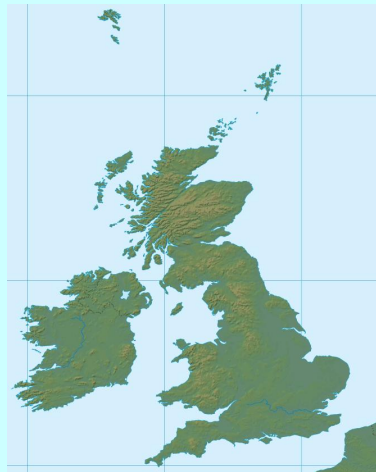


Islands

I imagine most people have seen maps of the holy land that are printed in some Bibles. If you have, you will know that the world of Abraham and Isaac, Moses and David was situated in a large land mass extending down to Egypt on one side and across the Arabian desert on the other. Their world went eastwards and northwards into Syria and Mesopotamia. West was, of course, the sea. Surrounded by other peoples and other territories, boundaries were always shifting. Geographically, then, their world was very unlike our isles.

Yet there are other kinds of islands and Jesus' world was island-like in a number of ways. Samaria was hostile territory for example and Galileans would often cross the Jordan to the east and re-cross it on their way to Jerusalem. Jesus challenged those boundaries in the story of the Good Samaritan with its telling phrases about passing by on the other side, and in John 4 where he goes to a Samaritan town and talks with the woman at the well. Within Judaism itself there were 'island' groups, religious, ethnic, and bounded categories of clean and unclean people. Again and again, Jesus challenged the presence of those boundaries and asked people to remember that in God's kingdom, there is no separation between different people (and compare what Paul says in Colossians 3.11).



Towns which were far apart could develop their own particular kind of insularity. Some were fortified and a struggle sometimes went on between traditional hospitality and welcoming of strangers and a hatred of oppressors and outside influences. Jesus was very clear how this could affect minds and hearts and how it could radically affect reception of his message. An insular attitude could make religious observation turn in on itself, so that the people of Israel, who were called to be a light to the nations, could become withdrawn and inward looking, concerned only with self- preservation and forgetting the much larger purpose of doing God's will. So Jesus suggests to his disciples that they must judge the receptivity of the towns they visited, bringing blessing to those which

were open and symbolically shaking the dust off their feet if they did not find a welcome (see Luke 10.10-16).

What is so remarkable about Jesus is that he refused to become an island of his own religious outlook, another prophet with his own slant on things. Though we find out that his disciples might have liked that very well, Jesus broke open the insularity of others and made them look beyond their own horizons (family/location/job/state of health) to the great inclusiveness of the loving Father. Yet this did not mean that he asked people to give up their unique sense of self or honoured traditions, but asked them instead to see these as a special resource to share the love of God with others.