

Sunday 9th September 2018

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10

Ps.146

Mark 7:24-37 The Syrophoenician Woman

Reflection: The Inclusiveness of God

I know the woman Jesus meets in our Gospel lesson today. I know her for I have seen the desperate, pleading look in her eyes, heard the grief-stricken yearning in her voice a hundred times. You know her, too, this one who would travel any distance, cross over any barriers, risk any social shame to save the life of a beloved child, sibling, parent, friend. We have seen her on our TV screens, scouring rubbish heaps, huddled in overcrowded boats on hostile seas, fleeing from violence, oppression, natural disaster, staring through the fences of refugee camps. We have seen her closer to home, pleading for improved mental health services, cursing P-labs, queueing at Work and Income. We know her well - and recognizing her heart-deep struggle, is it any wonder that we are troubled by Jesus' first response in today's Gospel?

When Jesus responds to the unnamed Syrophoenician woman, he compares her and her tormented daughter to 'dogs' – not of the cute pet variety, but little scavengers:

“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus' response to her is hard to understand in light of all that we have come to know of him.

One might surmise that Jesus was just tired. That perhaps his retreat into the region of Tyre was meant to be just that: a retreat from the constant pressure bearing down on him from countless needy, suffering people and those with earthly authority who would seek to stand in the way of what and who he was called to be and do. Maybe Jesus' weariness is what is heard in his seemingly instinctive response.

What emotions do *you* think Jesus carried as he withdrew to the Gentile towns of Tyre and Sidon. Was he tired, despondent, grieving; feeling isolated from hometown and

family? Was he fed up with those who had neither eyes to see nor ears to hear? Yet he still had great compassion for the lost sheep of *Israel* – those who flocked to him for healing in Jewish territory.

It is in this context that we read of his encounter in Tyre with the Syrophenician woman - a Gentile, an ancestral enemy of the Jews, a complete outsider, a lone woman – who on hearing of his presence, immediately seeks him out, believing in his ability to heal. She - in stark contrast to the devout Pharisees who don't understand or want what Jesus offers - seeks it out, 'doggedly', with intent and faith. She bows down at his feet and begs him to heal her daughter.

And yet, as commentator Karoline Lewis has said:

In the Syrophenician woman, Jesus discovers someone – a complete outsider - who truly hears *him* – who truly understands what *he* is saying, who courageously and cleverly responds.....

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs (we could read ‘left-overs’) that fall from their masters’ table.”

And immediately Jesus acknowledges her faith. In that moment, Mark tells us, her daughter is healed. And she will not be the last non-Jew, nor the last non-Israelite to whom Jesus offers blessing. (The healing of the deaf man in Sidon immediately afterward confirms this).

And yet, Jesus, was every bit as much flesh and blood and bone as he was divine. He was shaped and influenced by real forces all around him, born into and living in a particular time and place with all that meant.

As another commentator has reflected:

There is always stuff under the table. There is always more driving us than we realise. We are never as free as we think. We think we have a handle on what God is saying to us and then discover that the painstakingly swept floor of our dining room is littered with ungodliness. We sweep out the mess of our minds and, like the floor of our house, crumbs, dirt and unidentifiable stuff is soon visible again.

It happened to Jesus. He had learned about the priority of mercy and compassion over tradition when the Pharisees confronted him over purity laws. He had learned the priority of mercy and compassion over status and position.

Jesus, during his earthly ministry, opposed prescriptive pious living. While honouring the Law, he made clear that the Law was there to serve the people, not the people to serve the Law. And he learned the priority of mercy and compassion over otherness.

How *we* respond, when confronted with the narratives of the oppressed and overlooked, reveals who we truly are. Do we continue to ignore or deny the realities of oppression? Do we brush them aside as dogs? ...

... Jesus – in today’s Gospel - does the most difficult thingHe listens. And allows *himself* to be fundamentally changed.

Perhaps the directness of the dialogue between Jesus and the unnamed Syrophenician woman reminds us to name the differences and call out the unhelpful hierarchies *we* encounter in our daily lives. In order to be delivered from the demons that hold our society hostage, we need to name things clearly. This is a first step in the process toward full healing and restoration.

For some reason, I can’t help but bring to mind Barak Obama’s recent comments regarding the current US leadership. But perhaps I could examine events closer at hand – perhaps even our diocesan Synod? We heard and celebrated at Synod, the positive Social Advocacy initiatives like the Living Wage campaign and the Navigate initiative preparing and supporting soon-to-be-released prisoners. We heard about the Youth Hub, grief counselling programmes and the diverse ministries of the City Mission, all seeking to bring healing, wholeness and restoration to those in need.

But as we look under our own tables, there are significant crumbs to attend to. When brave parishioners speak of their vulnerability and grief as others of their parish family

choose to leave, when division causes deep pain, we know there is healing and restoration needed.

Having a mess exposed is painful, but it is also opportunity for healing. It opens our eyes to the hidden things driving us and opens our ears to the unrecognised voices pushing us. Healing from these things comes not from hiding the mess by insisting that we are right. Healing comes from acting on the unwelcome insight, and from facing the pain of changing ourselves.

Jesus was told he was kicking the child under the table. He stopped. He listened. He responded and healed the woman's daughter. He gave her, and her mother, a place at the table of God's compassion. This "place at the table of God's compassion" is not rhetoric. It is deep, life-changing activity which makes Jesus, Jesus. It heals him. It is part of his wholeness, part of his repenting and going God's way. For he creates a "place at the table of God's compassion" by going further north, deeper into Gentile territory, and on into the Decapolis, healing Gentile people.

The expansiveness of God's healing love, God's abundance, God's grace will not be limited by any location, any laws. It will not be diminished by any creed or decree. It will not be regulated by the many reasons *we* come up with as to why God could not possibly be God.

Today's story, when heard by the early Gentile Christians, would have resonated deeply with their experiences of encountering zealous Jews and even some Christian ones. But the surprising turn of the story – Jesus' recognition of the Gentile woman's faith, and her daughter's instant healing – would resonate with their own experience of healing and new life in Christ.

Do *we* notice the cries of so-called 'outsiders' in our community – those different to ourselves – who cry out in need of support, compassion, justice? And what emotions do *we* carry when *we* are not included, not heard – not understood....anger, frustration, despair, hurt, resolve...?

How often do we - as individuals, or as Church— become deaf to the cries of the other - instead bound and preoccupied by legalities, like the Pharisees. Could it possibly be, that we at times:

“transgress the commandment of God for the sake of tradition”.

How might *our* habits, traditions and ways of worship remain faithful, yet further embody the generous welcome of God? The God who came to the lost sheep of Israel and who in Christ, redeemed *every* nation.

So what do we take away from this morning’s ‘Good News’ story?

- Are we called to be like the Syrophenician woman? To not let any barrier stand in the way of love?
- Are we to learn to see Jesus in a new light — as one who could be changed — so therefore we too need to remain open to change and challenge?
- Are we, like Jesus of Nazareth, able to learn anew that faith can be discovered and lived out in and with people whom we might least expect?
- Are we called to recognize that the boundaries of who belongs and who does not are *ever-expanding*?
- Is the point simply to be open to holy surprise?

Is not the Christian story fundamentally about divine inclusion conquering human exclusions. About bringing people, through Christ, into the fullness of God's *shalom*, rather than shutting them out.

How might we respond? (*Let us pause & reflect....*)

God of many names, lover of *all* peoples
 may we, like the Syrophenician woman
 live our lives with faith, courage and determination,

seeking encounters with you in our daily lives.

In wilderness, scrap-heap times,
when our lives are crumbling,
when we feel rejected and unheard -
attune our hearts to your Presence,
our ears to your Word
our minds to your understanding,
that we may meet you
in *the outsider*
both beyond
and within us.
Amen.

Helen Roud