

Video/podcast reflection August 16th

Reading: Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Reflection

What has the most difficult thing for you during lockdown? I guess it will vary depending on your circumstances. Many people have said that it was the lack of face to face contact. And I agree. Yes, we were blessed with other ways to communicate but I found that it made ministry so much harder. For example, trying to arrange a funeral with a family I hadn't met before over the phone and email was so difficult. There was so much that was missing, all those things which you pick up from what is said and unsaid on a

visit to the family. Similarly, I tailed off speaking to people on the phone as again it is so much more limited than actually being with someone. Scientists tell us that a large proportion of communication between humans is non-verbal. We pick up on body language, tone of voice and facial expression without even thinking about it. Perhaps that's why we even miss subtleties on video calls, it's just not the same as being in the same space with someone.

I suspect that may well be the key to this gospel encounter. On the face of it, with just the text in front of us it can give us a pretty negative impression of Jesus and the disciples, not their finest hour at all. It looks as if the disciples just want rid of this woman and it seems that Jesus's first reaction is to ignore the cries of a distraught mother. When he finally speaks, his words are the equivalent of 'not my problem' before seeming to equate the woman and her people with 'dogs' and only finally giving in, commending the woman's faith and healing the child.

Perhaps though, like our texts and emails and even phone calls we might be missing what lies behind the spoken and written word. To start with it's quite remarkable that the woman addresses Jesus as "Lord, Son of David". She isn't a Jew but she knows a Jewish form of address connected with the Messiah. Just a clever woman trying to flatter to achieve her ends or given spiritual insight that Jesus is so much more than a final throw of the dice in her desperation? Nor are the disciples' words necessarily as harsh as they sound. Their words could just as well be

translated as "give her what she wants and send her on her way".

Maybe Jesus's first words are to test her faith, will she be persistent like the widow in the parable of the persistent widow and the judge.? Or maybe we should read Jesus's words as the outworking of an internal debate because it could be translated as "Was I sent only to the lost sheep of Israel?" No punctuation in written Greek of the time, no question marks or not to help us. But the woman is not put off. She continues to plead, now on her knees. And in the final exchange I picture something we can't get from the text alone. Jesus quotes an expression of the time or at least a summary of what a Jew of the time might say about Canaanites, but I picture it with a smile on his face, and the woman equally smilingly, playing the game has a quick response "Yes, Lord, but even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table". And with a laugh (picture the laughing Jesus) he exclaims "Woman you have great faith! Your request is granted".

We might also ask ourselves why Matthew places this story here. It follows a section where Jesus debates with the Pharisees about what is clean and unclean and Matthew was writing at a time when there was still debate in the early church about if and under what conditions Gentile Christians were acceptable. Those wanting to be more exclusive could point to the fact that Jesus's ministry was almost exclusively focused on the people of Israel, this story may well be important as a transition point between Jesus sending the twelve out as described in chapter 10 saying "Do not go among the Gentiles" and his ultimate

sending out of the disciples in chapter 28 "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations", the post-resurrection gospel is for the whole world.

And how might it speak to us? I offer three thoughts. The first is about persistence in prayer. Jesus waited before answering. It seems as if persistence in our prayers is something that is honoured.

Secondly, a broader point about inclusivity. Who are those that fall outside of our normal interactions? People we normally have little to do with because they are different from us in terms of age, ethnicity, culture, politics or anything else. Here as elsewhere, think of the woman at the well, Jesus engages with those considered way outside his circle. Not only does he engage with them but he blesses them with something. How many people do we engage with outside of our age group, social class, cultural background? How can we be a blessing to them? Equally as important, it could be argued that Jesus was changed by the encounter with the Canaanite woman, are we willing to be changed as well as engaging, and offering blessing, are we open to learn and be blessed in return? There is too much closing down of encounter with others today, particularly with others we may not agree with. Can we reflect Jesus's openness?

Thirdly, and more narrowly, perhaps this story reminds us not to jump to conclusions in communication with each other, especially when we don't have the advantage of having the person in front of us. Do we stop and ask ourselves is there a more positive meaning to the seeming harsh words on the

page or on the end of the phone? Was a comment perhaps made tongue in cheek? Is there perhaps something we've missed? Are we open to engage more fully or is our first reaction to take offence, to judge and even to shut off communication? Perhaps too to check what we write or say, particularly recognizing that the person that we are communicating with won't see the smile on our face as we framed the words. Perhaps to recognize that an emoji doesn't always make everything right! And lastly to be thankful for those times when we can fully be present with and to people.

Persistence, inclusivity and a state of mind that looks always for the good not the bad in others. All out-workings of our discipleship. Pray that Jesus may say of us "you have great faith". Amen.