

Trinity 15 [Proper 18 (B)]

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on 9 September 2018

Readings: James 2 verses 1-10 & 14-17; Mark 7 verses 24-end

Last week's gospel was the story of Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees over the question of ritual cleansing and the food laws. Jesus disagrees with the Pharisees over whether the various human inspired traditions of Jewish custom have any force or significance for Christians, the people of the new law of love and liberty.

The faith of the Syro-Phoenician woman in this week's gospel offers a sharp contrast to the hostility of the Jewish authorities. Mark follows the controversy over food with the surprising faith of a Gentile woman who comes to Jesus. After dealing with one issue that was clearly causing difficulties between different strands of the new Christian church, Mark records Jesus' teaching about a second issue that was divisive amongst the early Christians. In Jesus' dialogue with the woman, we see that although there was once a divinely ordered distinction between Jew and Gentile, this is now swept away in the wonderful new reality that salvation is available to all through Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, who is also 'the light to lighten the Gentiles'.

Jesus meets Gentiles on relatively few occasions. Jesus' meetings with the centurion at Capernaum and the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter he cures are clearly very significant, not least in the contrast of the unquestioning faith of these Gentiles with the lack of interest of the people of Israel in Jesus, whom the eyes of faith see is the Messiah. It is also very clear from the gospels that the old order is changing. The 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' have not responded positively to Jesus with faith. The first human being to confess Jesus as 'Son of God' is the definitely Gentile centurion at the crucifixion: the death and resurrection of Jesus is the start of the Church's mission to the Gentiles. The relationship between God and his people is indeed new and radically different. This time, the relationship is with the whole of humanity, and not just a favoured nation.

The cure of the deaf man follows hard on the heels of this incident.

During Jesus' ministry the miracles he performs always pointed beyond themselves. At a straightforward level he heals. Not just by what he says, but by what he does. He is not afraid to touch people and puts his fingers in the man's ears, touching his tongue with his own spittle. He gives of himself, physically and in terms of concentration and energy and, as a result, the man discovers the freedom of hearing and speech.

At another level this process illustrates the concern that Jesus has to free the hearing and speech for all who listen to him, whether or not they experience disability, including us today. It is only when we hear him clearly that we can, in turn, live out and proclaim the truth of his message.

Some people are disabled by poverty or by prejudice or discrimination against outsiders or foreigners, like the Syro-Phoenician woman. But yet it was she who recognised Jesus' true status. When she challenged him with her depth of faith he realised that his ministry was for all people. Both she and the deaf man were

completely open to Jesus, vulnerable in their total faith. Unlike the cynical well-informed Pharisees, whom we met again last Sunday morning, they did not presume they had the answers to life's questions. Nor must we. In the New Testament reading today, James gives us clear guidance about our behaviour and our relationships with others which is as relevant today as ever it was.

We are sometimes hampered by our complicated knowledge. It can blind and deafen us. True wisdom is being conscious of what we do not know and remaining open to being taught. Jesus works hard to clarify our hearing and our sight, our understanding and our insight, so that we allow and encourage God's truth to be heard and God's will to be done.

Deafness and blindness are not necessarily physical conditions. The scribes were deaf to the full meaning of Jesus' teaching while hearing his words perfectly. Some of Jesus' disciples were blind to events that seem obvious to us in retrospect. We are more likely to develop our sense of God and his working through us if we are conscious of how deaf to his voice we can become.

The secrecy motif which we find here and which runs through Mark's Gospel underlines that it is only those who believe in the risen Lord who can understand what is taking place. Just as Jesus restores hearing, so he gives to the disciples the spiritual ability to understand what is obscure. The disciples think that they can hear, but they show by their behaviour how little they really understand.

When people believe they have all the answers, a monopoly of the truth, there is a danger that they reinforce their blindness and inability to hear. Jesus will free us to be open to understand the truth, just as he freed the deaf man in the Gospel, and just as he freed the disciples to hear the deeper significance of what he was saying in his preaching.

Jesus told us that to love God well we must become like little children. Not *childish*, but *childlike*. There is a huge difference between these two states. With their ability to trust implicitly, children listen with open ears and see with unclouded vision. And in recognising our poverty, our spiritual inadequacy and our need for God, Jesus can work in us. Jesus can heal us in all our inadequacies, and to teach and show us what we need to know in order to hear the Word and act upon it. These gifts are given to those who ask. This is how the Kingdom of God is extended upon earth: by God's faithful people being fully open to hear Jesus, to tell the story we have heard and to live in such a way that allows all to flourish. We are called to be God's faithful people and Christ's Church relies upon the wisdom, insight and vision that God gives to us.