

Proper 15 (Trinity 10)

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 16 August 2020

Readings: Isaiah 56 vv 1 & 6-8; Romans 11 vv 1-2a & 29-32; Matthew 15 vv 21-28

The Old Testament reading set for today is from the prophecy of Isaiah where he speaks about justice, one of the recurring themes of his prophecy. Isaiah writes, 'And the foreigners who joined themselves to the Lord - these I will bring for my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.' Isaiah speaks clearly to the people of Israel, who themselves have known the pain of exile, about the importance of welcome and hospitality to strangers and aliens.

That is highly relevant as once again we see pictures of refugees seeking to make their way to the United Kingdom across the English Channel. This is not the day to explore human trafficking and go into the rights and wrongs of the UK's immigration policy; suffice it to say that human misery is all too evident.

In the Bible, we find the powerful message of the prophets and Saint Paul's writings to the young church where he struggles with the deep tensions over the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. The overriding message is God's mercy to all peoples.

Knowing what we do about the Biblical emphasis on justice and mercy, it's all the more surprising when we come to today's gospel reading, where we find Jesus being ungracious, even rude, and dismissing a Gentile who is a Canaanite woman and therefore, by every consideration, the classic outcast.

St Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish of the gospels, in that he is clearly writing to and for Christians who are still deeply connected and tied into the traditions and heritage of their ancestors. Time after time, Matthew draws attention to Jesus as the Messiah and the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. His mission priority is for the Jewish people: he sends his disciples to them.

This did not mean that Jesus was blind to the faults and failures of the tradition into which he was born. He makes scathing criticism of the religious leaders and the emptiness of some of the religious traditions to which they cling on. Part of the problem is clearly that Jesus' gospel message is more radical than what the religious leaders of his people could cope with. In spite of the powerful message to Abraham that he is to be the father of a great people ('In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'¹), and the message of the prophets about aliens and strangers and the need to be courteous to them, the worldwide and universal nature of the mission of the Christian Church really begins to take shape only after the resurrection of Jesus and Pentecost.

After another bruising encounter with the intransigence of religious leaders in a rather detailed conversation about ritual cleanliness, Jesus makes his way to the district of Tyre and Sidon, way to the north of Galilee and in modern Lebanon. This was Gentile country where he might well have expected some peace and quiet. But it was not so, as Jesus meets a Canaanite woman. According to Jewish religious norms, she was unclean and therefore to be shunned. But the previous debate about ritual cleanliness makes this rather awkward. Jesus had spoken clearly and pungently about cleanliness and uncleanness as he criticised the religious leaders for not being able to see the wood for

¹ Genesis 12 v 3

the trees and because their obsession with detail meant that they missed the bigger picture of God's grace and mercy.

It was bad enough to be confronted with an unclean Gentile woman. What made it worse was that she was clearly a woman of faith who could see the importance of what Jesus had to offer her. Initially Jesus simply ignores her. But she is so persistent that Jesus cannot ignore her any longer. At first, he is dismissive and even offensively rude; he speaks of Gentiles as dogs. But this is simply what she would have expected from a Jewish leader, given that rabbis do not speak to women in public - let alone a Gentile woman.

A fortnight ago, we heard the story of the feeding of the five thousand; after the great feast, twelve baskets of leftover food was collected. The woman piles the pressure on Jesus by asking for some of these scraps. Jesus gives in gracefully; her daughter is healed.

This is perhaps the only time when somebody who takes Jesus on wins the argument. She is a foretaste of what is to come: a Gentile woman who receives the grace and healing that only Jesus can offer.

The message for the Church of God today, as it has been for every generation that has heard this encounter, and wished that we had been there, is that our attention must never simply be focussed on those who are within the community of the Church. We do not have all the answers: those outside our fellowship asking sharp and uncomfortable questions need to be taken seriously, as so often they can bring us back to the priorities that Jesus lays before us, which we can all too easily and all too conveniently overlook. And equally, we should never give up on our prayers and our questions, persisting with God whenever we find human need that needs the grace and healing that only he can offer.