

Sermon – Trinity 10 Year A

Haselton – Outdoors Service 20 Aug 2017

There are some stories in the Bible that I still find deeply shocking and the reading we've just heard is one of them.

To our ears Jesus appears deeply offensive as he initially rejects the pleas of a Gentile woman to heal her daughter and calls her a dog, the common Jewish term of abuse for all gentiles.

Imagine for a moment a stranger from a different culture and place arriving in church on a Sunday morning. However hesitant and initially wrong footed we might feel as we fumble words of welcome and wonder what they are going to make of us and our worship, I cannot imagine anyone treating a visitor to church with the contempt Jesus treats this Canaanite woman.

So what is going on?

Whenever we hear a passage of scripture – especially stories relating to Jesus – we need to be aware of three things. First, the stage we have

reached in the unfolding story of God's revelation to humanity; secondly, cultural issues relating to Jesus' own place and time; and finally the point we've reached in Jesus' own story.

To our ears, the universal relevance of the good news of Jesus Christ is hardly radical. We take it for granted that God loves everyone and desires all to grow into relationship with Him. We don't question that the mission of the church is to all peoples. For us this is our missional starting point, it's hardly theologically or politically sensitive.

None of this was automatically true for Jesus.

Jesus may be the Son of God but he is still a child of his time. His radical message was directed primarily towards the hypocritical religious elites and those suffering as a result of social and political injustice; the beauty of this morning's gospel is the insight we are given into the way this message is expanded and enhanced by the faith of someone outside the circle of faith in which Jesus normally lived. Here is startling evidence of the Holy Spirit working through someone unexpected and we witness Jesus discovering that his teaching is more radical and relevant than even He imagined.

Jesus is tired and has probably entered gentile territory for a break; to get away from the crowds who need his teaching and his healing.

So the last thing he expects or needs is for an angry woman to start shouting and demanding help for her daughter.

Jesus' silence reveals his status as a teacher, for rabbis would not address women in public. We mustn't read into his silence either rudeness or confusion.

The disciples – who seem to adopt the role of Jesus' bouncers or security guards more often than not – try to protect him from the woman's advances, but she is insistent and determined, and despite the abuse kneels at his feet and pleads for help.

“Lord, help me” she says.

“It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs” Jesus retorts.

Despite this abuse from Jesus – for perhaps her life has taught her both to expect it and to rise above it – she keeps going.

“Yes Lord”, the woman agrees, “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.”

It's not been long (the previous chapter in fact) since Jesus has fed a crowd of 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes. I've often wondered what happened to the 12 baskets of crumbs left over. Perhaps here we have the answer; they were given to the dogs, and Jesus now, for the first time, realises the waste of that; that his good news can stretch further, should stretch further, and include all who have faith.

But there's another story that would have been uppermost in Jesus' mind too – for between the feeding of the 5000 and this exchange with the Canaanite woman is the incident on the lake when Peter attempts to walk on water. You might remember this from last Sunday if you were in church.

Here is one of Jesus' closest friends and followers whose attempt at having faith in God almost results in his drowning and deserves Jesus' painful retort ‘you of little faith, why did you doubt?’

You can almost see Jesus' mind ticking over here. On the one hand I have faithful Peter failing to have simple faith in me and here I have this foreign woman pouring out every ounce of faith that I didn't even think she had.

We might describe Jesus' reaction as a no-brainer. Of course the woman's daughter is healed.

This beautiful encounter challenges us on numerous levels.

It challenges us to think twice about the nature of Jesus; for here we see someone who is learning himself about his own identity and the emerging faith he is discovering through his own ministry;

It challenges us about the nature of the Holy Spirit and where the Spirit might be at work in the world; not only in the church perhaps but out there, out here, amongst the ordinary and in the day to day;

It challenges us to be on call for God all the time, even when we're trying to relax and get away from it all; that the latest interruption might just be a very,

very special opportunity to learn, to serve, to be, for God;

And it challenges us to live that great Anglican principle that is so important in village life – that this church, our church, us, the people of God, belong to everyone and are here for everyone. That it is in the blurred boundaries between church and village that we find God at work in hearts and minds; that our work as disciples begins when we step outside church, not when we step in; and that whilst the gathered community coming together for worship offers fellowship, sustenance, praise and helps ensure continuity of the faith, the mission of the church is about what happens outside, in the ordinary and the extraordinary exchanges of daily life.

It is there that we live most fully as Christ's disciples and where our service to Him is most fully realised.

Amen.