

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 10th Sunday after Trinity – 16th August 2020

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

People have puzzled over how to approach this Gospel reading, let alone how to preach it. To twenty-first century ears, hearing Jesus apparently refer to another ethnoreligious group as 'dogs' is, to say the least, uncomfortable. At worst, it seems to feed the objections of those who resist any sort of faith on the grounds that religious groups are basically at enmity with each other (and more often than not amongst themselves), that terrible things are said and done in the name of religion, and why should anyone want to have anything to do with it.

Yet, as with all biblical texts, context is important. So let us look for a moment at the context of this passage. At the beginning of this chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Pharisees and scribes come from Jerusalem to question Jesus. They ask why his disciples break the tradition of the elders by not washing their hands before they eat. Jesus doesn't answer their question but goes onto the attack, calling the Pharisees hypocrites for giving the appearance of following God's law but failing to honour its spirit, causing hurt in the process. After this run-in, Jesus explains to his disciples in more detail what makes a person clean or unclean. He says that the way in which our bodies process food has no moral implications, but the way we speak and act does. Our words and deeds, which can hurt other people, come from the heart, which is capable of evil intentions as well as good.

Jesus then moves to the district of Tyre and Sidon, and it is there that the Canaanite woman comes and asks him to heal her daughter. It is a pivotal encounter. Jesus has just been criticised by the religious authorities for not being 'pure' enough in his approach to the faith. Moreover, his own understanding of his vocation as Messiah is that he has been sent to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. (He said this to his closest followers when sending them out on their first journey to spread the good news: 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles ... but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' - Matthew 10.5-60.) And yet the woman in front of him appeals to his compassion, as many others have done.

Throughout the healing miracles we see Jesus bringing in outsiders, including the excluded – many of the categories of those who were labelled unclean by the purity laws of his time: Samaritans, Gentiles, tax collectors, sex workers, people with diseases, people with disabilities, people who were bleeding, people who had died. And here once again is a suffering individual who was ritually unclean – a Canaanite woman. Yet she pleads with him: 'Lord, help me.' Jesus knows his critics would reject her and consider him unclean even for speaking to her. Perhaps it is their criticisms that are running through his head when he says 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. Her witty reply that even the dogs eat what the children don't want releases the tension, and Jesus is amused and gratified that such faith has been found in an outsider, when it has been so obviously lacking in the insiders he was arguing with earlier. He heals her daughter.

Jesus's words and actions bring wholeness and healing, even as he makes himself ritually unclean in the process. Time and again, in the presence of Christ we see God's acceptance of those on the outside. Jesus has been challenging the Pharisees for narrowing the scope of God's acceptance for members of their own community. Now this foreigner challenges him in a similar way. The scene marks an important step along the road to the realisation – which by the time the evangelists were writing had become a lived reality – that the Gospel which Jesus was proclaiming was not only for the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' but also for the whole world.

From this point of view, the positioning of the story in the Gospels may be significant. In both Matthew and Mark's accounts it comes between the two feeding miracles – soon after the feeding of the five thousand and shortly before the feeding of the four thousand. Some have seen in those numbers a symbolism suggesting that the 'bread' – the word of God, the message of salvation – was being extended first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, as the Scriptures had predicted that it would. Five was a 'Jewish' number, after the five books of the Torah, the Law. Four and seven were associated with the Gentiles - the four corners of the earth, or the four 'beasts' in Daniel (which stood for the four Gentile empires that had overrun Israel), and seven for the traditional number of seventy Gentile nations. The healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter is placed between the two.

What does this passage say to us today? For one thing it reminds us that it is what goes on in our hearts that matters, and that this will affect our relationships and how we live out our faith. It also reminds us that wherever we encounter people being demeaned or despised we will find Christ there, loving

and healing and calling for justice. Lastly, it reminds us that it is not just the Pharisees and scribes who set up barriers, narrowing the scope of God's welcome and acceptance within a faith community. Christians are just as liable to do so if they are not careful. Anxiety over maintaining the 'purity' of a tradition can lead religious leaders of every time and place to exclude individuals or categories.

I well recall hearing Archbishop Desmond Tutu preach when he visited England some time after Nelson Mandela had become President of South Africa. It was a time of celebration, the long battle against discrimination won, and there was a sense of expectation and hope in the air. Tutu arrived to find the Church of England having one of its regular meltdowns about the place of women in leadership in the church, and the place of the LGBT community in the church at all. So he went on the attack, speaking passionately from the pulpit: 'Christ did not say "I come to draw *some* people to myself", but all, All, ALL.' It was a memorable sermon. Religious leaders in every time and place need to ask themselves: who are we excluding, and why? For God's love knows no boundaries, and in the end breaks down all barriers.

Isaiah, in our Old Testament reading, urged his hearers to understand this. The good news of salvation was not just for Israel but for all the nations. Those who had been outcasts were to be welcomed in. And the one who would come to fulfil the prophecy did end up breaking down the barriers that the religious leaders of his time had put across the temple entrance. For he came to the temple, as he comes now to our churches, with a scourge in his hand and these words on his lips: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all'.

Amen.