

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 14th Sunday after Trinity

5th September 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

We pick up the story today in Mark's Gospel where we left it last week, immediately after Jesus was being criticised by a group of scribes and Pharisees who had come from Jerusalem. They had asked why his disciples were breaking the purity code by not washing their hands before eating. In querying this, the religious leaders were implicitly criticising Jesus's own leadership of his disciples and undermining his message of good news. Jesus, in reply, challenged their cold-hearted focus on ritual purity and exclusivism, pointing out how it was resulting in the failure to uphold the spirit of God's law.

This next scene takes Jesus to the region of Tyre, which was predominantly Gentile territory. There he encounters the Syrophenician woman. The story is a notoriously difficult one to hear and to interpret. On the face of it, Jesus appears to reject a mother appealing to him in distress to heal her child. Not only that, he does so with apparently humiliating language, referring to her and her people as 'dogs'. Surely this is out of character?

Much ink has been expended in trying to explain the content of this story. Luke, writing for a Gentile readership, leaves it out of his Gospel narrative altogether. Matthew includes the story, though with differences from Mark's version (for example, the mother is referred to as a 'Canaanite woman'). In Mark's account, emphasis is sometimes placed on the fact that the word which Jesus uses for 'dogs' is the same word for 'puppies'. Is this, then, playful banter, with Jesus always intending to heal the woman's daughter, not needing to be persuaded but just reminding her gently that it was not supposed to be within his terms of reference? Perhaps.

Everything we know about Jesus from the Gospels suggests that he would be moved to respond to the Syrophenician woman's request. But perhaps he is still smarting from the scribes and Pharisees' criticism that he is being unfaithful to the traditions of his elders. He is deeply aware of his calling as Messiah, the anointed one, sent to save and heal those whom God has chosen. In Matthew's version, Jesus at first ignores the woman's request, almost as if he is struggling within himself how to respond. Then, almost as if speaking his thoughts aloud, Jesus says to the woman: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' That is when she comes right up to him, kneels in front of him and begs for help.

Once again, Jesus is confronted by a choice, the Pharisees' criticism still in his ears. Simply by talking to this woman, he will once more be considered 'unclean' by the religious leaders who criticise him, resulting in further confrontation and - ultimately - danger. Perhaps it is those critics' voices he is thinking about when he says to her: 'it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. But the woman's wit gets the better of him. Suddenly the tension is released and, with it, Jesus's compassion for the human being in front of him, irrespective

of her status and the distinctions he was so often challenged for not respecting. We hear his surprise and delight, after the argument with the Pharisees about who was and who was not to be considered acceptable: 'For saying that, you may go - the demon has left your daughter.' Once more, Jesus may have made himself 'unclean' in the eyes of his critics, but his words and actions are of love and of healing, reflecting God's gracious acceptance of all people, whatever barriers humans put up to exclude individuals and categories.

It has often been suggested that this encounter is pivotal for Jesus's understanding of his vocation. In his evolving realisation of what messiahship means, more than once he encounters greater faith in those outside the bounds of religious orthodoxy than in those within. Yet, until now, however much he has criticised the guardians of religious orthodoxy for trying to exclude people from the scope of God's blessing, he has still seen his own calling as being to his own people. But the Syrophenician woman, this outsider, will not let him limit it in this way. She challenges him to see the full implications of what he has been saying: this Gospel is for everyone.

It is worth recalling that what Jesus says to her about letting 'the children be fed first' is consistent with scriptural tradition: having been blessed by God, Israel was to become a blessing for 'all the nations'. The woman in front of him is saying: 'yes, and it's happening now'. By the time the Gospels came to be written, the Christian faith was already expanding across the Gentile world. Mark's Syrophenician points ahead to that expansion.

Perhaps we should note, too, the placing of her story, which comes between the two feeding miracles – the feeding of the five thousand and of the four

thousand. Some have seen in those two miracles a metaphor for the blessing of Israel and the blessing of the nations. For numbers in the Bible are usually significant. In the first miracle, there were five loaves and five thousand people to feed. Five was the number of the Pentateuch – the five books of the Law, the Torah. When all had been fed, there were twelve baskets left over – the number of the twelve tribes of Israel. In the second miracle, there were seven loaves and four thousand people to feed. The number seven was the symbol of perfection, here encountering the number four – a number which some suggest is associated with the Gentiles, forty being the number of the known nations of the world. In between the two miraculous feedings stands the woman with no name, asking for healing – for salvation.

So we can detect different layers of meaning in this encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman. What does it say to us, twenty centuries later? This story, like Jesus's response to the Pharisees in our Gospel last week, is another reminder that we too are called to love beyond all boundaries, ignoring human distinctions and prejudices – whether they be conscious or unconscious - because no one is beyond the scope of God's love.

As if to reinforce that message, Jesus's next encounter is with a man who is deaf and has an impediment in his speech. Once again, he is brought into contact with someone excluded from access to God's blessing by the religious leaders who saw themselves as the guardians of it. Those who were disabled were not allowed into the inner part of the Temple because, as people who were 'different', it was thought that they were displeasing to God. (Before anyone says 'but that does not happen now', we should ask ourselves how well the Church includes people who are disabled. Better still, we should ask them.)

Here, in front of Jesus, was a man literally excluded from being heard, owing to his disability. Jesus's response? '*Ephphatha.*' Be opened. There is nothing that excludes you from God's love and acceptance.

Christ's radical inclusion of all who were treated as outcasts in his time put him on a collision course with those who believed they were the guardians of religious orthodoxy. It took him all the way to Calvary. I wonder how far, in our time, we might find ourselves ready to go.

Amen.