

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 5th September 2021
Trinity 14 YrB

“Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God” Isaiah 35.4

In last weeks reading we heard from St James the need for our faith to be active and engaged if we are to be true witnesses of God and his love for us; a message emphasised in the accompanying gospel reading from Mark as Jesus offers challenging words, in quoting Isaiah, “people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me”.

The thing is we want to honour God but it is difficult. Clergy spend much of their time fretting over how to proclaim the good news of Jesus in a world that seems not to want to hear. We are all aware that confronting the community with the story of Jesus is challenging, especially in an age and day when it seems very few actually want to hear about God's love.

I wonder too if by the end of last week's Gospel Jesus felt that way too, was he feeling despondent and bruised. Afterall his teaching and way of living were being questioned. His message was being misunderstood, or at least not listened too or obtusely interpreted. In the reading of two weeks ago his teaching was even rejected by some of his followers who fell away saying the teaching was too hard. That has got to have hurt. I wonder if that's why, at the beginning of today's passage from Mark's gospel Jesus is trying to get away, to hide and bury his face.

One wonders if Jesus had effectively run away to Tyre. It was a Roman City formerly part of the Persian then Greek Empires; a city of Gentiles where, in theory at least, Jesus would not have been recognised. He enters a house and did not want it to be known he was there. He may not just be getting away from the pressures of the crowd but hiding from disappointment and frustrations and criticism. He is after all only human.

Then from out of the blue he is confronted, by a Gentile woman of all things. His words to her at her request for help are harsh, un-Jesus like; he calls her a dog! Her response is gentle and understanding yet firm and puts Jesus in his place, “even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs”. Jesus has emotions

and feelings; good days and bad days. He must have needed at times situations and people by whom he could be challenged and put right.

When the gospel readings of the past couple of weeks are brought together the impression we get is of a continuum of events that actually happen in real time over a couple of days. In realising this we can see that even Jesus is pushed to the limit, misunderstood and challenged almost beyond his capacity.

God brings back equilibrium to the Gospel story. The repost of the Syrophenician woman brings Jesus back to himself and the good news he has come to share; good news that reveals the divine love of God, for and amongst people, even the gentiles. So much so that Jesus is then able and ready to continue with his mission and ministry, affirming the universal message of God for all people by taking the good news to the gentiles, bringing healing and wholeness to those in need. The story ends on a high. The people of the Decapolis declare, "He has done everything well." Just the affirmation Jesus needed.

Even in the mission and ministry of Jesus we can see that the work of God is not easy, even Jesus gets despondent, losing his way. Often the work of Jesus can be challenging and difficult. Through our baptism and confirmation the mission of God, the work of Jesus is what we are committed to. Yet we can be apprehensive, even scared and challenged in witnessing to the good news of Jesus.

In his epistle, James reminds us that having faith and acting through that faith is the most profound witness to the good news of Jesus we can offer. Yet how can we do this witnessing in the world that feels like it doesn't want to hear? And when James refers to works what does he mean? What is Christian works? In the context of James' epistle works is the outworking of faith, it is the way in which we engage with the world, how we make decisions in light of our faith. It is what we do, how we behave, what we say, how we respond through our faith. This can be challenging and can of course result in friction, even rejection. However, such actions are rooted in the command of Jesus, "love your neighbour as yourself."

Sometimes it seems easier to walk away; to ignore a situation or person; to bury our heads in our hands and exclaim it is all too much, just as Jesus did, hiding in Tyre. There is one thing we forget in such situations and I think Jesus forgot when he hid in Tyre; the power and wonder and glory of God's love in creation. Isaiah says, "Be strong, fear not! Here is your God". That is what God reminded Jesus of when God sent the Syrophenician woman to the house where Jesus was staying to challenge and sort Jesus out. That's what God needs us to remember.

We are not called to live the good news of Jesus and proclaim it to the world under our own power, in our own strength and ability. God knows we are not strong enough. Jesus was reminded of his mission and calling, that it is in the divine nature of God made real in Jesus that these wonders and wisdoms are offered. For it is the power and wonder of God's love that is witnessed to, not our power or skill or ability. It is God's glory we proclaim, not our own. Everything we do or say we should do or say to the glory of God. Jesus' stumbling reminds us of our weakness, his rising again reminds us of God's power in us, it encourages us in our living the life of faith that calls us to offer good works that praise the name of Jesus.

So when we are tempted to ignore our faith, when the challenges of life come up against our relationship with God, when the world around us seems to demand we hide our faith, or at least keep our faith to ourselves let's remember "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God". You may be surprised by what happens next.

©David Neno