

Sermon for Trinity 10 Sunday 20th August 2017

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I have recently returned from the United States where unfortunately I picked up a bug and so instead of skipping around in the fresh New England air, I found myself sofa bound watching too much American news. The style there is saturation coverage. When I arrived nuclear annihilation via North Korea seemed imminent. The next day Far Right violence in Charlottesville, Virginia filled my every waking moment. Tragically today I do not doubt that events in Barcelona are having the same treatment. I found it increasingly hard to imagine anyone agreeing with anyone about anything. The abyss dividing each of the sides seemed to grow as each new word opened old wounds.

And reading today's gospel gave an echo of this irreconcilable side-taking world. For in our Gospel reading from Matthew this morning Jesus is shown retiring from increasingly aggrieved Jewish authorities and the needy crowds in Palestine for a time of quiet and reflection in the region of Tyre and Sidon – Phoenicia. But far from peace and quiet he finds a shouting woman desperate for her daughter who is seriously ill “demon-possessed” to be healed. The woman is Phoenician or as we are told here a “Canaanite”. And here is the echo, for there are tens of centuries of bad blood between the Children of Israel and the Canaanites. Canaan is the Promised Land – the land flowing with milk and honey – promised to Moses and finally achieved by Joshua. Much bloodshed accompanied the fulfilment of this promise and in all the centuries that separate Moses from Jesus and this woman. She is shouting to be heard not across a road but across 1500 years of mistrust, hatred and fear. And the feeling is mutual.

And this woman is not only a Canaanite she is a Canaanite woman. I need not I think explain the status of women in the first century world generally. You can imagine how low a Gentile – non Jewish – woman was considered by Jewish authorities of the time. The woman shouts at Jesus for his attention because she has run out of any other choices. She has probably heard about this great healer from those who have travelled to Palestine. Perhaps she can hardly believe her luck when the rumour that he has crossed into her region is true. Perhaps this man can do what none of her own people can do – save her daughter. So she risks all and she shouts.

Jesus response is unexpected. First he seems to ignore her, next he rebuffs her and then he insults her. She is not phased by any of this – she could hardly have expected anything else. But we are and we could.

For Jesus makes two statements are hard to gloss over. He tells the woman first: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and then: “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

Commentators stumble over this. One I read suggested that Jesus is quoting from the Jewish authorities to draw attention to that what he is going to do will be to indeed come to all the world. Another notes that the word for dogs Jesus uses is not that used for unclean street dogs, but little house pets. Maybe. Another suggests that tone of

voice is all and is of course unrecordable in writing. I think he is suggesting that Jesus face and attitude belied his words. I can believe this for the woman is brave enough to respond to something in Jesus's voice and manner that his words do not suggest. She plays with his response and claims just a crumb from the table of Israel.

I do not know. We cannot know. All we do know is what actually happens. Jesus commends her faith, he does what she has asked. "And her daughter was healed instantly."

The woman has risked herself and her community to come to Jesus. She begins shouting and ends kneeling. Jesus has risked himself and his community to speak to this woman and then to answer her deepest need.

There is in this exchange a sense of real people meeting. Human divisions are real. They cannot be wished away. There is no pretence here that bringing Jews and Gentiles to eat at the same table will be straightforward. Jesus did not come into the world as a magician with a wand, but as a man who is the Son of God with a message. Wounded human histories, all our hurts and heartaches divisions between individuals and between nations prevent us hearing the message of God's kingdom where nation shall speak peace unto nation and the lion lie down with the lamb.

Living this message and building the kingdom does not take most of us to summit talks or CNN studios. It takes us to the divisions in our own lives, our own wounded histories.

I shall not end by drawing simple "take-homes" from this very challenging gospel reading to our very complex world. But note only this: The woman believed that in Jesus healing was possible and her faith, her audacity, her tenacity in holding on to this belief did bring healing. Perhaps we shall be prompted to look again at the places in our own lives where healing is needed. Past hurts, present anger, sides taken without us even realising there were sides. Praying for the right opportunity and the right words to take a risk and shout a greeting across our own divided worlds. Amen