

Sermon for 16 August 2020, based on Gospel reading Matthew 15: 21-28

Have you ever been caught up in a conversation that you find uncomfortable or you don't agree with what's being said? Or have you ever thought you knew someone well, but suddenly they act out of character - and you don't like what you see?

These questions could apply to this morning's gospel.

We witness the disciples being mean spirited to the woman who came to Jesus for help, and we are presented with Jesus, who let's be honest, is not very likeable.

This passage from Matthews Gospel is an uncomfortable read and if you don't squirm and find it so, you have missed the point. It stinks of discrimination and exclusion.

Jesus knew he was coming to the end of his ministry so he went to the Gentile region of Tyre & Sidon to escape the crowds and find time for rest. This was dangerous as it was bandit country, the disciples would have feared for their safety. They didn't get the rest they needed as a Canaanite woman came after them crying out to Jesus for help for her sick daughter. What's more, she was a gentile not a Jew and she was forceful. In the culture of the time, no self-respecting woman would speak to a man the way she spoke to Jesus, it made for an uncomfortable situation made worse by the negativity of Jesus' in response to her pleas. This is not the action of the Jesus we know and love, whose compassion for the needy is boundless. What was he thinking? The disciples follow his "lead" and tell Jesus to "send the woman away" protesting that she wasn't of their religion or their group. Did they all regard her as unworthy of compassion? Jesus' comment that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel seems to suggest so!

Again I say, this is not the action of the loving, healing Jesus that I know. Yet if he had agreed with the disciples, he would have sent the woman away, instead he takes his time as the woman pleads "Lord help me". He then initiates a conversation with her, still not offering help, but rather insulting her further by suggesting she is no better than a dog, feeding off the scraps under the table.

I like this woman, she's feisty and she has the desperation of a parent wanting help for her child. She stands up to Jesus and argues her case. Yes Lord, I know who I am, I'm not a Jew or one of your "gang", but even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters table! In other words she puts Jesus on the spot; she lets him know she doesn't want a feast, she's happy with scraps, and she tells Jesus he has enough goodness for everyone. Jesus finds himself being challenged for his reticence, AND on his claim to be the Messiah! By a Woman, no less.

The feeding of the 5000 which shows the abundance of God with his generosity that doesn't discriminate. Generosity that transcends all boundaries of race and gender, the opposite of what we hear today. But this woman has courage to give Jesus a jolt and challenge him to think again. She refuses to be denied help because she does not fit his disciples' criteria? She was a Gentile, happy with her identity and where she came from, she wasn't looking to be converted, and she challenged Jesus to show her compassion anyway. Jesus, seems to like her persistence and recognised her challenge to him to think again in his response in v.28 "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!

A lesson for all: If Jesus has the courage and humility to admit he was wrong in his attitude, so should we. There is also a lesson here is for the disciples who were happy to sit at the feet of Jesus with their friends yet balked when "an outsider" came enquiring. They excluded this woman from making her own connection with Jesus by discriminating against her because she was different.

Is that what we do? Do we put boundaries around ourselves, and our church, our club; and expect others to join us on our terms?

I said this was an uncomfortable passage. It's uncomfortable because we don't like the reaction of Jesus or the discrimination of the disciples, perhaps we don't like an outsider teaching us how to welcome the stranger. But if we really want to be Christ like we have to live like Christ and acknowledge our mistakes and learn to accept those who are different from us. Not to change them, but to show the compassion that Jesus did, and hope by doing so, we help to grow God's kingdom here on earth.

Amen