

SERMON 20 AUGUST 2017

It is amazing how often an apparently chance encounter with someone can have surprising affect on one's life. It might be something as simple as a passing stranger giving one a smile at a time when the day didn't seem so good, to a conversation that opened up a whole new understanding. It might be something one reads that suddenly casts a new light on an issue and makes one want to explore that more. It might be something shocking one sees on television that shakes one's boundaries and shows that those boundaries have been too closely set. There are so many things that can surprise and nudge us out of our comfort zones. It might be uncomfortable, but what would the world be like if that didn't happen!

There is much going on in the world today that challenges us in all kinds of ways, many things that can make us fearful, or angry, or sad. There are many things that seem to run counter to what we believe is good and life-giving. We seem to have slid well down a slippery slope where hateful words pervade the media, where people denigrate one another in public and there is little respect visible anywhere. This is held against a background where so much abusive behaviour that has been carried on in private is being dragged into the light of day and seems to pollute the atmosphere. There are big issues of people's welfare, people's lives at stake. We are being asked to vote on same-sex marriage, against the wishes of so many who are directly affected, and inevitably campaigns are being waged on both sides of the debate as a result. How many of the people involved in these have actually met, spent time with, listened to, cared about those whose hopes are at stake, as well as those who feel that the good order of society is threatened? How much, against all this background of today's roller-coaster of public noise, do we want to retreat into our safety zones and batten down the hatches, to shut down and limit what we hear and see?

This is the kind of situation where we know that the Christian faith can be co-opted by different people who hold different views, where texts are pulled out to support a particular viewpoint. It's as if we have to pull God down to take sides. I can only imagine how much sorrow this must cause in the heart of God, if we are making God into some super-sized human being, as we often do.

I deliberately extended back the reading we heard from Matthew's gospel, beyond what the lectionary set down, although the extra verses were bracketed. I think they are important. Jesus had been criticized by the Pharisees because he and his disciples had not washed their hands before eating. This was no small deal because hand-washing was built into their cultural ritual as well as being part of obvious hygienic importance. I expect it is something we all do ourselves, having had our parents always ask us as children "Have you washed your hands?" as you sat down for the meal. We know how important cleanliness was for the Jewish people. We know how much of their lives were dictated to by what was regarded as clean and unclean. Foreigners were unclean. Foreign women particularly so. How simply Jesus puts it – that it is not what goes into our mouths that makes us unclean but what comes out of them. So how much uncleanness there is around today! And how much that does make our society sick. This was really radical talk by Jesus and not something that would endear him to the Pharisees. One can feel the discomfort of the disciples who ask him if he knows how much he has offended them. Yet Jesus is not denigrating the Pharisees but speaking a truth about the things that defile a person and society.

So from there Matthew moves us to the region of Tyre and Sidon, to foreign territory. The story of his encounter with the woman who is described as Canaanite in Matthew, and Syrophenician in Mark can feel uncomfortable for many reasons. We know that both Mark and Matthew's communities were dealing with tensions about non-Jewish members and this story would have spoken to their people. Perhaps it loses its edge for us, who are part of the long story of Christianity that was owned by Gentiles from near the beginning. This was their discomfort back then, not ours now, even though we may have trouble in broadening out our understanding of the Christian faith to embrace the very different cultural expressions of that faith in non-Western peoples. Deep down we do make God in our own image.

The greater discomfort in this passage is in Jesus' attitude. He seems to behave dismissively and rudely towards the distressed woman, even including her in the disparaging term of "dogs". "Dog" was a common Jewish description of foreigners. This is not how we see Jesus. Something of great significance is happening, that is

perhaps the most uncomfortable thing of all: Jesus changes his mind! He was the one who was the bearer of wisdom, the teller of stories that illustrate the love at the heart of God, that demonstrate how people could live their lives with integrity and truthfulness. But he seems to have got it wrong, at least here, at this point! He had held to a narrow viewpoint instead of being open. And yet, what happens is that, in the face of the woman's persistence, her deep love and care for her daughter, he turns, and sees her, hears her prayer as she kneels in front of him. It is a tense moment as he says: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Her quick reply both shapes what will happen next and gives us an image of how we could all regard the openness of God's table, because even the crumbs dropped by those who have the seats will fall to the floor and feed the hungry ones who are waiting in hope, dogs or otherwise. What Jesus sees and responds to is her faith. Here was a woman who had no background in what she should believe or not, what was the correct teaching to hold on to and learn. It was not to do with such belief but only what she knew in her heart that Jesus could do for her daughter. He changed his mind and his heart and healed the unseen daughter, immediately.

There are echoes of other stories like the healing of the centurion's servant, but this story is barrier breaking. So we have to ask ourselves what barriers may we have constructed around us as to who is included or not, who believes in the right things or not, who lives in the right way or not. There are so many challenges in this story: if we are the ones sitting at the table, who sits with us? Who gets the crumbs left over, or do we sweep them up and put them in the bin? How much wastage is there in our land of plenty, when there are those who have nothing? These are systemic issues that we can feel powerless to address or change. They can be yet another thing that makes us want to retreat into our comfort zones. Jesus message was not about making people feel guilty but about enabling them, us, to live in the most open and generous way we can as we try to care for one another. Jesus message is about changing hearts and minds through love and so it is dynamic, never static and locked down to keep it safe. I love the words of the music we heard earlier: the mind of God is forever changing, forever restless to make all things new, while the love of God, it is never changing.

Clive and I were in Sidon, as most of you know, in January. We wandered through the very ancient souk, bazaar, imagining people moving through the alleyways down the centuries. We were led through to a large open square and down a short side street to where ancient tradition says Jesus met with the Canaanite woman. It is not just envisaging the place now that gives the story meaning for me. What brings it right into the present is that just next to it is another very old building from which we could hear children at play. Happy sounds. It was a centre for Palestinian refugee children. Outside was a sign, like a no entry road sign but the image in the centre of the sign was of a gun with the red line through it.

Some things dishonour and defile. What breaks through barriers, changes minds and hearts is the expression of love, both verbal and practical. It is love that changes us, that leads us on to new understandings, that may make us uncomfortable but lead us through to new places of growth and richness and vitality. There was a surprising encounter with something of this for me on Thursday. We were watching PBS News Hour, live from Washington DC. There had been shocking footage of the violence in Charlottesville when white supremacists marched in. There had been plenty of comment surrounding President Trump's response. But then they went to Charleston, South Carolina, a city where there is great division between black and white and a lot of economic disadvantage. But here was a sign of hope because a leader of the African American community and a leader of the white supremacist community had come together. They knew that they came from polar opposite positions but they also knew that violence was not the way to deal with issues. They had produced a charter as a basis for their different communities to sit down and talk. They were not worried about criticism that they were selling out. They knew that the way to change people's hearts and minds, and their own, was through coming together, not marching apart. Hopefully we can find ways of walking together, whoever and whatever our lives are like. We are all pilgrim people, alongside those who we may not yet understand. Together we may yet learn to share the food that is on God's table so all can find nourishment and not leave some scrabbling for crumbs.