

## Sunday 16 the August 2020

Good morning and welcome to worship here at MPN.

As we continue to meet virtually, we are so glad that you have joined with us to take this time now to worship. A reminder that we meet for coffee on Zoom at 12 on Sunday, for a catch up. Meeting details change each week, please email the Office for this week's details.

This week we saw our young people go back to school and while I know it was an anxious time for you, I hope that you enjoyed being back with your friends and being able to learn again. Because every day of life is a school day. We should be open to learning what God has to say to us, each and every day. We plan to have a back to school Sunday in the next few weeks and we can think of your schools and pray for the coming year watch this space.

### Call to worship

Listen and understand, says the Lord.

We come with open hearts and minds to explore and uncover new insight.

With story and encounter, argument and influence, passion and heartache, we share in the discovery of faith and community.

Let us worship God.

### Reading Matthew 15:21-28

This passage from the Gospel of Matthew is deeply, deeply uncomfortable. If we don't find it uncomfortable, we have missed the point. And it should be uncomfortable for us for two reasons:

Firstly, we are confronted by a Jesus who is not very likeable: a Jesus who ignores a woman in pain, a Jesus who speaks over a woman in derogatory terms, a Jesus who seems to take a racist attitude in his dealings with this situation. This is not a nice portrayal of Jesus, is it? We would much rather have a Jesus who is cosy and warm and loving; a Jesus ready to show compassion and mercy at the drop of a hat. But we would be twisting the text considerably to portray Jesus like that...

Secondly, we are confronted by a group of disciples who show a distinct lack of compassion; disciples who are racist, disciples who think they are better than everyone else, disciples who are annoyed by the presence of others outside their group. We want to have disciples sitting earnestly at the feet of Jesus, learning from him and showing the love of God to others in need. But we would be twisting the text considerably to portray the disciples like that...

This is a deeply, deeply uncomfortable passage and we need to sit with the discomfort if we are to learn from it.

It would be easy to preach a sermon that immediately explains away the discomfort - but that would not be to remain true to the text, so we need to avoid that temptation. Let's look at the story ...

We are told in verse 21 that, "Jesus went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon". Jesus knew that he was coming to the end of his public ministry. Soon, he would go to Caesarea Philippi where he would ask the disciples who they thought he was and thereafter, everything else would be building up to his crucifixion in Jerusalem. So Jesus withdrew to a district where he would not be under any pressure to perform. Perhaps he needed some time to himself, so he goes to Tyre and Sidon, which were non-Jewish areas, Gentile regions.

So immediately the disciples were out of their comfort zone: this was Bandit country, and all their safety nets as Jews were removed here. They were amongst Gentiles with whom they had little or nothing in common and they probably felt nervous and agitated by being in such strange surroundings.

But Jesus and his disciples were not going to get any rest there either because we read in verse 22 that, "A Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting..." So the levels of discomfort rise even more...

Here they are in a foreign region, outside of their physical comfort zones, and a woman comes after them, pleading for help. Not a Jew, but a Gentile. And not a man, either, but a woman. And no self-respecting woman would talk to a man the way she was talking to Jesus, let alone a Gentile woman talking first to a Jewish man before being spoken to.

This is a deeply, deeply uncomfortable situation. All the social rules are being broke here and everyone – disciples, Jesus and woman – are outside of their own comfort zones.

And what is Jesus' response? Nothing – absolutely nothing...Verse 23: "But he did not answer her at all".

How could Jesus appear so indifferent to the genuine anguish of another human being? Well, we can come up with all sorts of theologies that justify Jesus in this moment; theologies that defend him from looking bad in our eyes - but the truth is that the text doesn't give us any idea why Jesus said nothing. The truth is that we just don't know what was going on in Jesus' mind at this moment.

But the disciples read into this that Jesus can't be bothered with people who are outside of the chosen group, and they display annoyance at the woman, thinking that this is mirroring Jesus' own emotions. In verse 23 we read, "And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us'." They didn't want anything to do with this woman who was outside of their religion. They didn't

want anything to do with this woman who was outside of their little clique and they assume that Jesus has the same opinion too.

To be honest, his reply in verse 24 doesn't really help matters because he simply says: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel".

But whilst it seems at first glance that he is agreeing with the disciples, when we consider his response further, we see that he actually isn't agreeing with them. If he had agreed with their racist, exclusive position, he would have done what they asked and sent the woman away. But he doesn't do that. What he does is start talking – he begins a dialogue that will eventually lead to spiritual growth for both the disciples and the woman. Jesus is being very clever here. He has not given in to the disciples' request and he clearly wants to draw the woman into further conversation...But he does so in a way that will engage the inquisitive nature of all the characters in the story.

And so the woman takes her cue and asks again in the most simple and painful of ways: verse 25, "She came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me'." There is such agony in her request, such pain, she has no more words to say. And what we want here is for Jesus to pick her up and hold her and respond out of deep compassion to immediately give her what she needs.

But he doesn't seem to do that. Instead, it seems like he just rubs her face in the dirt and humiliates her further in front of his friends. Verse 26: "He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'."

What a seemingly cruel response, what a seemingly humiliating reply; not even to address her pain but to suggest that she is somehow less than human, no better than a dog searching for scraps from the table. This doesn't appear to be Jesus at his most likeable, his most compassionate...

But the woman is feisty and she is not prepared to give up and she throws Jesus' words right back in his face, verse 27: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table'."

She is saying, surely there is enough to go round?

This story comes very soon after Jesus' feeding of the 5000 and it comes almost immediately before Jesus' feeding of the 4000 and Matthew doesn't place the story here by accident. There is a clear message here about the abundance of God that transcends all racial boundaries and gender issues. The abundance of God cannot be contained or fenced in: there is more than enough to go round...

And here is the really controversial teaching in this story, I think...

Look at Jesus' response, verse 28: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!"

But the woman had not come to faith in Jesus in the sense that she wanted to be his follower or that she was prepared to forsake her Gentile heritage and come within the boundaries of the Jewish religion. Culturally, she remained exactly where she was and asked Jesus to reach out into her cultural setting and meet her there.

So who is challenged and stretched in this story? The woman? No. It is Jesus who is challenged. It is Jesus who is having his sense of identity and role as Messiah stretched.

Who is converting who in this passage? The truth is, there is a sense in which the woman is converting Jesus - not the other way round...

Jesus is having to enlarge the boundaries of his mission to encompass the outsider; it is not the case that the outsider comes in to Jesus' pre-set mission boundaries.

And that is what is so radical for this passage and what gives us such a sense of challenge today.

The temptation for us is to expect others to come and join us - but join us on our terms, not theirs...We want new people in church, we want people to become Christians and we will offer the hand of friendship and welcome to them. But ultimately, we want them to join us and become one of us and to play by our rules. Isn't that the story of the Christian church throughout history? You are welcome to join: but here are the rules of belief, and the rules of behaviour.

The church throughout history has become like a club with membership rules and many local churches operate like a clique where people are expected to conform in order to belong. But that is the exact opposite of what Jesus is doing in this story.

In this story, Jesus reaches out and meets the woman in her culture. He doesn't ask her to join the club. He doesn't set any provisos for the welcome. He just accepts her as she is, shows compassion and grace, and allows her to continue in her own cultural way of being.

But more than that, it appears that Jesus and the disciples are open to learning from this woman from another culture. They don't just tolerate the difference. They actively engage with it, are prepared to be challenged by it, and to allow themselves to grow through this cross-cultural interaction.

Perhaps that is part of the mentality of a truly Mission-Shaped Church; that rather than expecting others to join us exclusively on our terms, instead, we are prepared to learn from others and enlarge our own vision of mission and ministry as a result of engagement with others who are different from ourselves or have different expectations of what church should be.

Ultimately, a Mission-Shaped Church stands against the idea of Church as a club to be joined and lives by the ideal that we have something to learn from others and that,

as we truly engage with others, so we will be stretched, so we will grow in the faith, so our church will grow, and so we will become more Christlike.

A Mission-Shaped Church does not put boundaries around itself. Instead, it is prepared to dismantle the boundaries, to get rid of the idea of 'Us and Them', and proactively choose to learn from others with different ideas so that we can grow together as the people of God; with all our differences, with all our different expectations of God and Church.

I said at the beginning that this is a deeply, deeply uncomfortable passage - and I believe that to be true. It is uncomfortable because we don't really like the arrogance of the disciples. It is uncomfortable because we struggle with Jesus' response. And, ultimately, it is uncomfortable because we are confronted with the idea that an 'outsider' should teach Jesus and teach the disciples what it means to embrace the fullness of the mission of God.

It is uncomfortable because we are confronted with the reality that we have a great deal to learn from 'outsiders' and that, if we want to be truly Christlike, we have to embrace 'outsiders' not so that they can become like us but so that we can learn about God from them.

It is a brave church that seeks to be truly Mission-Shaped, because we will be forced to change and to grow in ways that we never thought possible before.

But there really is no alternative if we want to mirror the ministry of Christ.

To God the Father,

God the Son

God the Holy Spirit

Amen.

Blessing

Lord help me...

Lord help us...

Lord, hear us...

Lord hear the cries of your people....

Go into the week with faith.

Go forward into all that awaits in this week, with faith. For the love of God is with you; surrounds and upholds you.

And the blessing of God Almighty

Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Be with you and remain with you

Now and forever more

Amen.