

Sunday 6 September: Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Ephaphatha: Be Opened

Readings: James 2.1-10, 14-17; Mark 7.24-end

Today's Gospel reading is a difficult one. Jesus Christ, the exponent of unconditional love, seems distinctly conditional in his initial response to those in need. First of all, this 'man for others' wants to hide away from the crowds, entering a house in the region of Tyre and keeping his presence secret like a celebrity hiding from the paparazzi. Perhaps he's tired of giving, worn out by helping. It is such a human reaction. Don't all of us sometimes need to escape; the chance to find space where we will not be recognised or got at by telephone, e-mail, text, letter, meeting, appointment, demand; the pressures of our lives off our backs for a moment so that we can just be? Yet it is exactly at that very point of wanting a break and looking for a moment of privacy and space that Jesus is once more confronted. When you are involved in ministry to others you always have to remind yourself that for the person who is coming to you in need, the problem they are expressing may, for them at this moment, be the most important thing in their lives, that they have been waiting to express, while for you, the one ministering, this may be the umpteenth or more request of the same day. The person in need is basically requesting your undivided attention and help, whilst filling your thoughts may be the warning: "Don't get involved, you can't do any more, this request is like the end of a piece of string, they themselves must sort this out", or you simply don't know the answer. And it often seems one of those perverse laws that the most impossible demands are made at the very moment that you least want them – the very moment when you were hoping to escape. This is exactly what seems to happen to Jesus – at the very moment he seeks to escape from the demands of his ministry he is confronted by a Gentile, a woman of Syrophenician origin, who has heard about him, and now is begging him to cast out the demon from her daughter.

Yet even if he is under pressure his initial answer to her seems astonishingly insulting and racist, rightly offending all our politically correct sensibilities. Jesus responds to her request "Let the children be fed first for is it fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!" How can he reply like this? How can the son of God refer to a Gentile woman in real need as a dog unworthy of food from a Jew? Is Jesus simply testing her, setting up a situation whereby feigning prejudice and opposition he allows the woman to witness to her faith, thus herself defeating prejudice and revealing a faith greater than the Jews? Or, more controversially, is the human Jesus, himself a Jew, party to that prejudice, a prejudice he has grown up with and which he has assimilated: the prejudice of centuries of mistrust and hatred, the belief that their culture and their religion is superior, that they are chosen and that this Gentile woman and her daughter is an unclean inferior – a dog? Is the woman's reply what he is hoping for or does her response disarm him, disarm his prejudice and force him to change his mind because of this encounter?

The woman replies "Sir even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Her willingness to accept self-denigration, because of her love of her daughter and need of Christ – breaks through the prejudice of centuries. Jesus hears the one who his people have hated and despised. He hears her and through her hears a people who have been treated as sub-human and who through her words cry out for dignity and recognition. And what happens? Jesus, by hearing her, changes; changes his mind, changes his response, answers her request to be heard. And in responding to her he honours her and she is transformed from being regarded as scavenging dog, to the human and mother she most obviously is: a full person worthy of God's love and healing, not a sub class but a sign and gift of faith to all. In

Matthew's Gospel Jesus replies "Woman you have great faith your request is granted." In Mark: "For saying this you may go, the demon has left your daughter."

As I hear these words I think of all those who are waiting to be heard, waiting to be accepted as those also worthy of God's love. I think of my own feelings of unworthiness and I think of the life of those I have seen waiting for the crumbs from the table. I think today of the homeless man who joins in the prayers of this church each day and is going round every day from shop to shop asking for a job, knowing that if the management find out he is homeless he will not get the job and stay homeless. I think of the asylum seeker I know who has been to hell and back, through violence and torture. These people – whose stories are never heard, or if they are, are thought too extreme to be believed – deeply wounded people in need of sanctuary who our nation often condemns as 'bogus'. I think of the foreign student who has to pay four times the university education fees of an English national and under the new stricter immigration laws has to undergo six months of waiting and interrogation, in constant fear of deportation, to get a visa renewed to stay here and then carry a compulsory identity pass like a criminal being tagged. I think of the person who comes to me in mental anguish and distress who I and others step back from and avoid because we do not want to hear or lack the energy to take on the rawness and depth and agony of their need. I think of the Palestinian priest calmly pointing out the check points, fences and human rights abuses as I travelled with him through Israel. All around us each day there are people whose stories need to be heard. And like Jesus those voices, if they are heard, change us; change our minds and our way of seeing.

Revelation is not a once and for all event in the past. I believe it continues today: Christ's revelation breaking into our lives through the real encounter with others, acknowledging the personhood of the person we never let ourselves encounter, never let ourselves hear; real encounters with real people that change our minds and make a nonsense of the world's brutal prejudices; continuing revelation which reveals that, as Bertrand Russell wrote, it is only ants and savages who put strangers to death; revelation which has slowly and painfully taught us that it is not of God to torture, burn, behead, slaughter, ethnically cleanse those of other faiths creeds or denominations, that it is contrary to the will of God to send children up chimneys or force them to work 16 hours a day in sweat shops to make football boots; that God created all in his own image both male and female and that the oppression of women and the failure of the church to hear their voice and acknowledge the fullness of their gifts and leadership is not of God. Over the last two centuries we have been called to repent for the terrible evil of the slave trade which took the Church as a whole far too long to condemn. We are members of a Church which is called today to change its mind and realise that it is not of God to treat gay people as if they were a lesser or sub-species unworthy of the fullness of God's love, forced to hide the love which is the well-spring of humanity and full personhood – not a problem to be solved, but a gift to the church; change which has opened our eyes to the past brutal injustices of racism and called us to celebrate the wonderful diversity of different culture and ethnicity and rejoice in the realising of its full potential; change which calls to account indiscriminate bombing of other nations as though they were some inferior species whose lives are cheap reported as numbers not as persons; change which calls each one of us to account for the way we use the world's resources and acknowledge that our lifestyle choices continue to cause untold suffering among the poorest nations of the world. Are we, like Christ, not called into the uncomfortable encounters that change our minds and which make us realise that salvation is not a select 'G Club' for which a chosen few hold the membership cards – rather Christ's life is the revelation of God's unconditional love for all?

In our Gospel today, it is when Christ listens and hears the voice of the Syrophoenician woman that the healing of her daughter takes place: she finds her daughter lying peacefully on

the bed and the demon gone. It is a sign of a wider healing: a healing for the child but also for the mother too, no longer seen as a dog but one called to share at the same table; and beyond her, the whole Gentile people. This miracle is a sign of the widening in our understanding of God's family – no longer the despised, looking for crumbs fallen from the table, but sons and daughters who share the same bread of life: living sacraments of God's inclusive love.

As we see in Christ, we have to go on giving, giving radically; go on breaking through those prejudices which limit and distort our relationships; go on being confronted and re-orientated by our encounter with those who need us, disturb us and ultimately change us. For ultimately what a privilege it is simply to open our eyes and ears and our lives and allow the full personhood of another to set free, often revealing the presence of Christ, when we were least expecting it. When we are no longer able to hear a voice like that of the Syrophenician woman and be changed by it; that is the real poverty and danger of our world.

Ephaphatha: be opened.