

Trinity 15, September 8th, 2024

8.00 Holy Communion at Brook

Isaiah 35:4-7a, James 2:1-10, 14-17, Mark 7:24-end

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Our gospel reading today continues our readings from Mark's gospel and is part of a series of stories of Jesus's ministry as he moves backwards and forwards between Jewish and non-Jewish or Gentile areas in the north of modern Israel, all the while avoiding the major urban centre of Seraphim, the base of King Herod, which would for him have been a dangerous place to be. And in the reading, we see two miracles – the healing of the Syrophoenician woman's daughter and the healing of a deaf man. The first of these is, in modern terms, somewhat shocking. Was Jesus really being rude to this woman, obviously in desperate need? Did the woman actually challenge Jesus' racial prejudices.? However we answer these questions, the fact that this story is included in the gospel speaks to its authenticity – it is not something that Mark would have made up. But in fact, attention to the text helps to explain what was going on here. The nature of the exchange between Jesus and the woman is a typical rabbinic teaching method – a provocative statement that the teacher didn't necessarily believe but was designed to elicit a response from the listener to draw him or her closer to the truth – and the Syrophoenician woman played this game rather well. Jesus said

Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs

And the woman answered

Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs

And the story ends with Jesus's approval and the healing of the daughter. Note too that the word used for "dog" signifies a pet, household dog, rather than one of the wild dogs that hunt in packs – so to some extent a term of endearment. And to claim that Jesus was prejudiced against non-Jews simply doesn't fit with the earlier stories of Jesus healing and teaching in Gentile rather than Jewish areas. And of course, the interaction we have here was with a woman – and Jewish Rabbis simply did not engage with women in this way. Another sign of Jesus' acceptance and compassion.

Jesus then moves back into the area of the Decapolis, a mixed Jewish, Gentile area where we have the story of the healing of the deaf man with a speech impediment. Jesus took him away from the crowds, touched his ears and his tongue and prayed Ephphatha', 'Be opened', and the man heard and spoke plainly. Jesus tried to stop others talking about this and spreading the story, but to no avail and the passage ends with those around saying

He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak

echoing the words of Isaiah in our first reading

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped

So what are we to make of these accounts? Firstly, I think it forces us to consider the miracle stories in the gospel. In our sceptical and materialistic age, there are many who would have grave doubts about whether or not these actually occurred. From a personal perspective I have no issues. If one believes in a God who took human form, and rose from the dead, the greatest miracle of all, then it seems to me that we should almost expect miracles of this sort to occur. Now in John's gospel, as is well known, he chooses seven miracles that he presents as signs illustrating who Jesus was and uses them to point to the eighth sign – the miracle of the resurrection. The resurrection is incidentally the only miracle of importance to the early Christian letter writers such as Paul and Peter, and the only one they mention. And perhaps the story of the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter is in this category of a sign - that the salvation that Jesus offered is for all people, not just for men and not just for the Jews.

Secondly, the miracles are simply acts of compassion on the part of Jesus. For the miracle that gave the deaf and mute man his hearing and his speech, Jesus really didn't want what happened to be publicised. He encountered a human need, and he met it. It was as simple as that. And of itself that lays out an example before us as to how Jesus' followers, you and I, should behave. But note too, that at least in the first case, Jesus was trying to remain anonymous

He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice

He almost certainly was trying to find some rest and solitude, after an arduous period of ministry, but nonetheless, when he saw the human need, in his compassion he met it. And that is perhaps the second, somewhat uncomfortable lesson, we can draw from this passage – we are called to show compassion on others need, even at times we feel least like doing so, when we simply want some peace and quite and don't really want to be bothered.

Our epistle reading, from the letter of James, the brother of Jesus, to the early church is intensely practical, no high-flying theology or difficult concepts, and in it he echoes the teaching of his brother about showing our compassion to those in need.

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? Without trying to meet the needs of others, our faith, without works, is dead.

Uncomfortable teaching perhaps, but teaching we need to take to heart.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen