

Matthew 15. 21-28; Isaiah 56:1-8; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
8 & 10 a.m. @ St. Andrew's, Totteridge
20th August 2017: 10th Sunday after Trinity

Of Sheep and Dogs

O God, help us to listen to your Word with understanding, to receive it with faith, and to obey it with courage, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

We cannot know how others feel – we cannot read minds – but what means do we employ to do just that? How often do you offer leading remarks to find out how someone really thinks or feels? Is there anything wrong in doing this? Some might say this is unduly manipulative, and they may be right, but as with so many areas of human behaviour, I think it depends on the nature of our intentions.

If we direct our encounters in order to entrap, to embarrass, to be cruel or judgmental, then maybe we should think again. But if we do this in order to honestly discern or to draw out the truth of how someone feels, particularly if we are genuinely trying to help them, then maybe this is okay, even if it's done in front of others.

There are plenty of examples in all the gospels of how Jesus seems to know what's in someone's heart...

Matthew 12:25 - And knowing their thoughts Jesus said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand.

Matthew 22:18 - But Jesus perceived their malice, and said, "Why are you testing Me, you hypocrites?"

Mark 2:8 - Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts?"

Luke 6:8 - But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!" And he got up and came forward.

Luke 16:15 - And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.

John 2:25 - ...and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

On the face of it, what Jesus says to the Canaanite woman in today's gospel is, quite simply, appalling, and flies in the face of what we want to believe about Jesus, who he was and what he stood for. She comes before him in all humility, kneeling at his feet and is prepared to endure undeserved humiliation because she knows he has the power to heal (pic). He seems to want to exclude her – she's not a member of the chosen tribe, so she should go. When she persists, he likens her and her people to a pack of scrounging dogs.

Seen from almost any perspective, but especially in these modern times of instant worldwide reportage when, with a few obvious exceptions, the albeit dwindling majority still seem to espouse liberal values of tolerance, inclusion and open-mindedness, these are appalling insults. Just imagine Justin Welby or Pope Francis using metaphors of that kind about Muslims today – they'd be pilloried. Maybe we're all too cynical now, just not prepared to see more deeply, to allow for the possibility of innate goodness, to believe in ulterior, more beneficial motives and to have faith in them.

Is this what Jesus is doing? Asking us to believe in him totally, in a way we deny to certain types, classes, races or faiths; any that don't meet with our approval and who despite their diversity all end up being tarred with the same brush? Some

believe that this passage shows our Lord in the very act of revising his own understanding of his own mission. The meeting with the Canaanite woman takes place just after his sharp attack on the Jewish observance of ritual purity that takes no account of interior sincerity or humanity. It's the heart's intentions that matter, and the poisonous effect of conscious and deliberate actions that leads to damage of both self and others (Mt.15.19). The episode leads to the geographical and metaphorical crossing of a Rubicon, where Jesus and his supporters enter the Gentile territory of Tyre & Sidon (B. Nichols).

Others believe that Jesus said what he said 'with a twinkle in his eye', as much to say, 'You know what we Jews are supposed to think of you Gentiles; do you think it right to come for a share in what I bring especially to the chosen ones of Israel?' (F. F. Bruce) After all, the written word can't convey or preserve the effect of the spoken word; maybe Jesus' intonation invited the Canaanite woman to persevere.

Or maybe he was testing her? Not because he wasn't already aware of the depth of her faith, but because he wanted to demonstrate this to his disciples, who wanted to turn her away. Either way, she was quick-witted enough to persist in her faithful humility with the extended metaphor of the household dogs under a family table, the kind of dogs who, unlike the shunned pariah dogs of 1st c. Palestine, were pets, playmates of the host's children.

There are people out there in the world who say they have no faith. This is not true. We all place our faith in something,

someone, somewhere even. What is true is that we all get to choose where we place it, even if in our delusion we place it in the shocking intolerance of white supremacy or the terroristic ideology of Islamic fundamentalism. Jesus offers his sheep something rather different to these warped perversions, even if they sometimes claim to be extolled in his name.

Jesus seeks the individual whose heart harbours only after that which brings life, the good, the living, the joyful. People who genuinely repent of their mistakes and who genuinely try day-by-day to follow in his footsteps with a persistent and dogged determination. People who remain by his side even in the face of dismal trials, keeping hope alive in their hearts no matter what, knowing that even if they do fail, they can bring that failing to God and be forgiven.

This is the kind of profound faith that Jesus extols in all the synoptic gospels, like that Gentile centurion (Luke 7:2-10), whose sick servant, like the Canaanite woman's daughter, he heals not by personal contact, but from a distance.

Amen.

Matthew 15. 21-28 - The Canaanite Woman's Faith

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'²⁴ He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'²⁶ He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'²⁷ She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Isaiah 56:1-8 - The Covenant Extended to All Who Obey

Thus says the Lord:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

² Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil.

³ Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
'The Lord will surely separate me from his people';
and do not let the eunuch say,
'I am just a dry tree.'

⁴ For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—

⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

⁸ Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 - Israel's Rejection Is Not Final

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

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