

The Church at Carrs Lane Sermon 17.08.14

Isaiah 56.1, 6 – 8/Matthew 15.21 – 28

It hardly needs me to say that the words of both our readings this morning resonate powerfully in 2014...their themes are relevant, contemporary, unmistakeable, challenging...possibly, unnerving. They focus on the foreigner, though some of today's 'red tops' might phrase it rather differently. Immigration will be a key issue at the next General Election; our current engagement with City of Sanctuary and Church of Sanctuary says something about ourselves in 2014; the words of the readings come to us from the very area where tensions continue under the general title of Israel-Palestine. We must also grapple with the fact that in the gospel reading we encounter Jesus at his most controversial – some would say unlikeable, whatever the final outcome of the passage. In a way, the Isaiah passage is easier, with its clarion call for justice and seeming utter inclusion of the foreigner. The matter of faith lies at the heart of both passages, of course – belief significant in ways that might cause us to struggle somewhat, though it is not difficult to see why their own experiences made the Children of Israel especially sensitive to matters of exile, slavery, temporary homes and refugee status. These are passages which offer grounds for reflection on current issues rather than any tidy answers.

The reading from Isaiah is remarkable. The Jews are preparing to return from exile to Jerusalem; you could anticipate growing confidence and go-it-alone mentality. After all, the tradition among the Jewish community in exile was to protect its identity by exclusion – why broaden the base when a period of relative security beckons? Yet at the very moment when the community is anticipating return, it is called upon to be inclusive. All worshippers of God who keep the Sabbath and maintain justice are welcome. It is possible to be cynical at this point: given that only a relatively small proportion of the exiled community was willing to join the returnees, they needed everybody they could get. There was a need for cheap labour for major buildings projects which required a degree of skill...how little things change. Nonetheless, this does read like a cynical piece of writing – and Isaiah puts down a marker for inclusiveness still drawn on today.

The gospel reading is complicated – and I need to say at this point that I remain deeply unhappy with many of the commentaries and commentators as they grapple with this passage. Why should we feel always that we need to let Jesus off the hook when controversial things crop up!? Matthew describes the woman as a 'Canaanite', not as Syrophenician as Mark does. Canaanites were the ones whom God's people in the Old Testament were told to destroy and cleanse from the land, so you could argue that any personal encounter on the part of Jesus is extraordinary, liberating, controversial, inclusive beyond the wildest dreams of his day. Frankly, I don't know. A distressed woman comes to Jesus and he insults her. People have tried all kinds of excuses – that he was teasing her, but you don't tease the mother of a sick child; that to be called a dog wasn't insulting, but it was – banish thoughts of faithful companion and pet, the reference here is dirty scavenger. Ponder also the fact that the woman is not meek and respectful, she is assertive and demanding.

It is perfectly legitimate, I think, to applaud the Jesus who learns quickly from his mistake. The more open commentators argue that it isn't a sin to be wrong, or even to be prejudiced; it becomes a sin only if you continue obstinately along this path once you have been enlightened...and I don't have any problems with 'Jesus on a learning curve', but I still remain to be convinced that this represents the complete argument. Many argue that the core message here is that we must learn to deal with the Jesus who changed his mind: he is challenged by a persistent mother, and the lengths to which she would go for her daughter reveal to him a new understanding of his vocation. This is a very human Jesus, grounded in his culture and background, who has to learn to look further afield. His meetings with people were genuine exchanges – not teaching monologues or one-way healings; he could receive as well as give.

I do like this particular take on the reading. We must ensure that all our ministries are genuine exchanges; gone for ever is the one-sided paternalism which has characterised so much 'charity' and even teaching in the past. We continue to learn from the seeming unlikeliest of peoples and places. We are in the business of receiving as well as giving, and that it is difficult for the control-freaks who have a disproportionately large role in so many of our churches. There is also value in noting that if Jesus could change his mind, then so can we! In what areas is this most likely to happen? When has our understanding of Christianity been enlarged most significantly? Many would argue that people of other faiths still have much to teach us about hospitality and reverence for scripture. For 'Jesus on a learning curve' read now, 'Christians on a learning curve'. If we deny that such a need exists, then we are deluding ourselves completely.

Even when we have said all this, however, I am not sure that we have got to the heart of the reading. Jesus learns that it is possible for a foreign woman who worships a foreign God to teach him something truly important. Here, perhaps, we have the incident that pushes Jesus' inclusiveness beyond all existing boundaries. Not only women, not only foreigners, but even those traditionally thought to be God's enemies can be welcomed in. Even in the supposedly enlightened times and place in which we live, even within a church which has traditionally thought of itself as being open and inclusive, there remain compelling lessons to be learned from the ways in which Jesus was effectively forced to change his world view. We pussyfoot around our attitude towards other faiths, and historically have seen little reason to prioritise inter—faith work in one of the most diverse cities in Europe: why? In the autumn, we will reflect again on how our considerable resources should be invested in a variety of ministries which appear to flow from our guiding principles...but as one of the ministers here, I remain surprised, I think, that inter-faith matters continue to bump around resolutely at the bottom of our list of priorities.