

Sunday 20th August – Trinity 10 / Proper 15

The Gospel of Matthew, from which the majority of our Gospel readings are taken from this year, is considered to be the most Jewish of all the Gospels. The author's preference for the term 'Kingdom of Heaven', the description of Peter's commission in scribal categories and interest in the law are traits, which point us in this direction. And it is in the section of Matthew's Gospel, from which our reading is taken today, that, together with the accounts of various miracles, there is also evidence of Jesus' growing conflict with the Pharisees. This in some senses, conflicts with the words from the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament reading, where we read about the 'foreigners' joining themselves to the Lord and being accepted by him. For as Isaiah says, the House

of the Lord God, is to be a house of prayer for **all** peoples. (Isaiah 56.7)

And that remains the situation today.

For all are welcome here to St. Andrews, which is the Lord's House, and all who are in love with our Lord Jesus Christ are welcome to share and participate in its worship.

And while it is true that the church still places an important emphasis on the ritual of the liturgy played out from Parish Churches to the great Cathedrals throughout Christendom, these rituals must never get in the way, or be a means of preventing others, partaking in our 'remembering' of our Lord's passion and death, made visible especially in and through the Holy Communion services.

It is as we reflect upon Jesus presence with us now, and offer our worship to him with our

lips, that from the purity of our own hearts, we, the people of God, meet to offer that praise to him.

But what perhaps above all other is important to Jesus, is the state of our hearts for as we are reminded by his words on the Mount of Beatitudes, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’

What matters to God is not so much how we act; not so much as what we actually do, but what we **wish** in our heart of hearts to do.

‘Man’ as St. Thomas Aquinas a 13th Century Theologian has said ‘sees the deed, but God sees the intention.’ While the church still needs order and discipline by which the followers of Jesus are expected to abide, rules and regulations must never, as was the situation for the Jews in Jesus day, override and in some

cases, prevent others entering into, the presence of God.

That is not however to deny for example the tradition of our own church, in expecting those who wish to identify themselves as part of this church, here in St. Andrew's, accepting certain rules and the responsibilities which confirms that membership. For we have a Gospel to proclaim, each one of us, but in our own way. And the emphasis and publicity given to the perversion of the Islamic faith, over recent years, emphasises how much more we need to make sure that the Christian Gospel of God's all-embracing love, is heard and received by all, especially in our nation today.

How the Canaanite woman in our New Testament reading came to hear of Jesus' love and power we do not know.

For having had his run in with the Pharisees and scribes, we see Jesus leaving Palestine, and for the only recorded occasion in the Gospels, going outside of Jewish territory, into the districts of Tyre and Sidon, to Phoenicia.

And in this act, foreshadowing the going out of the Gospel to the whole world, one commentator has said that it perhaps marks – *‘The beginning of the end of all barriers.’*

For Jesus, there was a need to remove himself from the pressure of those who were intent on destroying him, so that he could prepare the disciples for the future. There was also a need to get away from the crowds so that he could teach the disciples. But even so, Jesus’ desire to get away from the crowds, is to be thwarted, as he is met by the Canaanite woman whose daughter is ‘tormented by a devil.’

Her insistent pleadings get on the nerves of the disciples who seem to suggest that Jesus should get rid of her, and perhaps in meeting her request, it would be the simplest way to do this!

But Jesus responds to her request by saying that he has been sent by God, to bring back the ‘lost sheep of Israel.’

And it is then that the woman falls on her knees before Jesus and says ‘Lord help me.’ For this woman is not asking for the ‘bread’ that Jesus has come to give to the children of Israel, but only the leftover crumbs. And having only two weeks ago heard once again the account of the feeding of the 5000, we remember that at the end of that first feeding, there were twelve baskets of crumbs (the 12 tribes of Israel) left over when all had been fed.

Jesus may well make the point that ‘it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But the woman makes the point, which surely cannot be lost on any of us here today, in the light of the plight of the people of the Middle East and elsewhere, that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ And her great faith is rewarded – her daughter is made well.

What then does this woman of Phoenicia say to us here today?

First and foremost, that she had love. As one person has said – ‘She made the misery of her child her own.’ For in her heart there was the love for her child, which is a reflection of the love of God for **his** children.

Secondly, she had faith. She began by addressing him as Son of David – she ends by

calling him Lord. She began by following him - she ended on her knees. She began with a request – she ended with a prayer.

And - **Thirdly** she was persistent, she was not to be discouraged. For many people, prayer and thus God, is a final resort, but for this woman, Jesus was her only hope. She came with a passionate hope and a refusal to be discouraged. She was not going to take no for an answer.

Finally, she had the gift of cheerfulness and although she was in deep trouble, she was passionately in earnest. And yet in all of this, she had a certain way with her as she responds to Jesus comment.

The example of this woman to the church today, shows how as a result of her problem, she exhibited a faith, which grew until it

worshipped at the feet of the ‘Divine’ Lord Jesus. A persistence springing from an assured hope in Jesus’ power to heal her daughter and a cheerfulness, in adversity, which would not be dismayed.

It has been said that the church exists for the sake of its non-members, and much of my own ministry has been to the ‘outsiders’.

God does not call people in order to dismiss them later, and he does not give gifts and then ask for them back. But when his people do not respond to the call or want the gift, that does not render them useless. Instead God uses that refusal as an opportunity not to take the gifts away from their original recipients, but to give them more widely, in the hope that when the first recipients see others enjoying God’s gifts,

they will blow the dust off of their own, and start joining in.

For it is not what we take into ourselves that is the problem – it is what we allow to proceed from within ourselves.

So, in the words of the Apostle James – let each one of us learn how to purify our own hearts, and with a pure heart, love others in the name of Jesus Christ.