



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 14th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 18 Year B

James 2. 1-10 [11-12] 14-17

Mark 7. 24-37

I remember, it was years ago now, even before I had begun my ministerial training, going on a placement to a local church. I suppose in those early days it was just to gain experience. I was down to preach very early on and the passage was this one from Mark. It was a nerve wracking experience, though I had been giving talks at St. Leonard's for years, it's not the same away from a familiar place. All was well though and I enjoyed my time there. When I look at this passage I am always reminded of myself, standing there scared stiff in front of those strangers.

The earliest of the gospels is of course Mark's so this is the first account of it. The story also appears in Matthew 15. 21 though here she is referred to as the Canaanite woman. The account in both gospels is virtually identical as is the lead up to it. Jesus has been talking to the Pharisees who have tried to trap him over the law and the fact that his disciples were eating with unwashed hands. As we saw last week this is simply a ruse to discredit Jesus. What it shows is the utter lack of faith of these Jewish religious leaders and their growing antagonism to him.

Now Jesus travels to the north of the lake to the district of Tyre. He did so because he did not want anyone to know he was there. The point has been forcefully made that wherever Jesus goes the crowds pursue him. He simply can't find space for rest and prayer. Now the point about this place is that it is not Jewish territory. It is Gentile territory. So hopefully he might be able to be left in peace for a while. Also he is out of the way of leaders whose only intention is to make trouble for him. However, almost at once he is found by a Syrophenician woman.

It is tempting for a woman writing about this incident to focus on the fact that Jesus helps a woman in this story or even that she corrects a man about his attitude to her. That is not the point; in fact it would be a serious mistake. The central point is that she is a Gentile. Now put the story into context, Jesus had been rejected by the Jewish religious leaders; they have no faith in him and they do not

want the Jewish crowds to have faith in him either. The Pharisees are the religious teachers, the people who thought they had got it right with God. This is a woman and a foreigner. Jews would pray, 'Thank you Lord that you have not made me 'a slave, a Gentile or a woman.' This woman, fulfilling two of these categories, would certainly be considered of little account by the Pharisees. Their lack of faith is juxtaposed to her faith in Jesus,

'a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.'

She has heard about this young rabbi, she knows he has healed the sick. Her daughter is demon possessed and she, as a mother, is desperate to help her child. Now we come to the point,

²⁶ 'Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

Mark makes her nationality quite clear. She is not a Jew. Jesus' answer seems blunt if not downright dismissive. But to read this story as a woman teaching Jesus he is wrong would be to totally miss the point of the account. That is not at all what is happening here. Jews would regularly speak of Gentiles in this way and no doubt Gentiles could use language of a similar nature to Jews!

No, don't pigeon hole this remark as some kind of insult. The point goes far deeper. Jesus' mission is to the Jews. He is the promised Messiah and he is bringing the good news of God to the Jews first. This is what scripture taught, when the Jews accept their promised Messiah, God's new creation on earth will begin and all the nations will turn to God. I have said the time was short for Jesus; he only had three short years in which to teach the Jewish people that he was the fulfilment of the scripture, the anointed one in the line of King David. He is walking the road that will lead to Calvary and his final sacrifice of himself to gain salvation for all who turn to him.

Already we have seen that Jesus is breaking through man made convention to lead people to God. He touches those who are unclean, which was a taboo thing to do. He does so to bring healing and new life through the power of God. He heals on the Sabbath. Jesus does what is good in God's sight. 'The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath' sums it up. Rules are put aside if they get in the way of God's work.

It was not Jesus' vocation to bring the good news to the Gentiles. That would happen but not yet, hence his answer to the woman. So much is encapsulated in that short sentence.

Her answer to him is really to be read as almost banter though inspired by a desperation fuelled by love for a cure for her daughter.

²⁸'But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

Jesus' mission is to the Jews, it is short term though and after his death and resurrection the message will be spread to the four corners of the globe. Here is a Gentile woman showing the faith that the Jewish leaders lack. For that faith she is rewarded. Once more Jesus cuts through convention and his healing love for all humanity is seen.

²⁹'Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' ³⁰So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.'

We cannot but hear the words of old Simeon echoing through this passage,

‘to be a light to enlighten the Gentiles.’

The Gentile magi at the beginning recognise this child as special in some way but this Syrophenician is the first of the Gentiles to turn to Jesus. We have seen others such as the centurion who comes to Jesus in faith for healing for another. Jesus’ mission is not simply healing. He has warned the crowds against expecting miracles; his ‘signs’ point to God and to himself as of God. Yet we are also told that when Jesus saw the crowd, he ‘had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.’ The Pharisees and the like, those who should point the way to God are ‘blind guides, ‘whited sepulchres.’ Their behaviour leads the people away from God in Jesus, and it stands in stark contrast to this Gentile woman.

Jesus is the saviour of the world and he will die for the world on Calvary. Jesus rose again and defeated death and sin forever. No one is to be in ignorance of Jesus’ saving power. Jesus’ words at his ascension at the end of Matthew’s gospel are his great commission to his disciples and all of us.

‘And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

The time is now ripe says Jesus, ripe for the message to be taken to the Gentile world.

Mark is writing his gospel for the early church, mostly for Gentiles. These are the people who have the responsibility for building up the church in the ways of God’s Kingdom. Mark is writing of the wonderful works of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.

‘Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.’

This simply means Jesus returned to Jewish territory. The Decapolis means the ten towns around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has enemies now, powerful ones. Herod Antipas has already executed his cousin John the Baptist. We think back to old King Herod who had tried to destroy Jesus as a child. A Messiah was not wanted by the rulers. Those in power cling to power, usually at the expense of anyone who gets in the way. To the religious leaders Jesus was a threat too, he challenged the accepted ways, in fact he turned the old ways upside down and replaced them with God’s way. He challenged the Pharisees and co and he showed up their controlling hypocrisy. They are out to get him, yet Jesus’ mission has still a way to go. He can’t afford to bring down their wrath on his head yet. He has God’s commission to fulfil.

Once more Jesus is surrounded by crowds this time,

³² ‘They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. ³³ He took him aside in private, away from the crowd,’

Notice that Jesus took the man away to deal with him in private. Then that Jesus ‘looked to heaven,’ once again he heals in the power of God. Jesus

'put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. ³⁴Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' ³⁵And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

This man is deaf and now he can hear, he could not speak but now he speaks clearly. We remember Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, he reads from the prophet Isaiah,

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

He says that the prophecy has come true in their hearing. In other words, I am he, the one foretold by the scripture; I am your Messiah who will bring in the reign of God's justice and peace, his new creation. Jesus has in his healings been releasing people from the captivity of sickness or disability. They are free to begin again, they have the fullness of life restored to them and he asks that that life be lived in belief in him. Of course this is metaphorical too; those who are deaf to his word, those who are blind to him will have the opportunity to turn to him.

As yet however Jesus does not want the crowds to proclaim these healings far and wide. Before the impending wrath of the earthly powers descends upon him, he has much to do in God's name. He needs the time and space to fulfil God's will.

Such a secret cannot be kept for long. There is a paradox here of course Jesus needs people to spread the news of him as saviour and Messiah and yet he needs time too.

³⁶ 'Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. ³⁷They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

The secret is not a secret for long. The words echo those of the disciples, 'Who is this that even the winds and waves obey him?' This man is of God, they have never seen anything like this before. Of course the word spreads, and as it does so the storm clouds gather over Jesus.

We hear the words of Mark here too. He is writing of Jesus as the Messiah, God incarnate. Here in his gospel is the record of Jesus' life and works, his death and resurrection. His audience is the early church, new Christians who are hungry for his account.

St. Paul is the 'prophet to the Gentiles' though of course there are many more who took out the word of God to the known world. James the brother of Jesus was head of the church in Jerusalem. St. Paul and St. James are writing to the early Christians about matters of theology and behaviour based on the teachings of Jesus. They are continuing to lay the foundations of the Christian church. Last week we saw James explaining the behaviour expected of those who call themselves Christians.

The followers of Jesus were meeting to worship Jesus and break bread together. It is obvious though that things are beginning to go wrong in the lives of these people and indeed in the new church.

² 'My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?

This does not just say avoid favouritism. It has obviously been happening and James is condemning them for it. In fact he says can you really square such behaviour with your professed Christianity? Christians must not behave in this way. He gives a detailed analysis of what has been going on

²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet', ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?'

The example James gives is that of the behaviour of people towards the rich. Making a distinction and treating them with respect and as superior while treating poor Christians with contempt. That won't do. For a start, says James, who are your oppressors? The rich! It is the rich rulers who drag Christians into court because they worship Jesus Christ. It's not the poor who persecute, they are the downtrodden. Besides that kind of behaviour is opposed to the teaching of God. The whole point about Christianity is that all are equal in the sight of God, there is no distinction. All who believe in Jesus Christ and live in his way are co-heirs with Christ and children of God. Because of this favouritism should be anathema to all who call themselves followers of Jesus.

Favouritism within a family, within an organisation, or society will lead to unhappiness and discontent, discontent weakens it. Within a church it is the antithesis of Christ's teaching and should have no place.

⁸ 'You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

Jesus when questioned about the greatest commandment answers, 'love God and love your neighbour as yourself.' You can't do this if you favour one and disregard another. Notice James calls it the 'royal law' this is because it is the law of King Jesus, their Lord and master. Jesus also changed this slightly when he altered the last part and the commandment became, 'love one another as I have loved you.' It's not just about loving as you love yourself – no, it is about loving as Jesus did.

The rest of what seems a complicated paragraph talks about the law. What James is saying is that Christians must live by the law of Jesus Christ the Messiah. It simply is not possible to pick and choose, to keep one part of Christ's teaching but to do what we want or what is expedient elsewhere. No, the law of God, the law of right is absolute, the minute you start to manipulate things according to what you want you are on a sticky wicket. God is merciful, God is forgiving, but God forgives those who truly repent and try again not those who think, oh well I've said sorry now I'm free to go my own way again and hurt people in the meantime. God defends the poor and the vulnerable, not the oppressor.

Jesus brings in God's new creation, we and all Christians are part of that process so to be Christians we have to obey the teachings of Jesus. Evil is very real and all around, it is the job of every Christian, indeed every decent person to stand against it in all its subtle forms.

This leads on to James' next point. The argument about faith and works still rages. Actually James is simply reiterating the teaching of Jesus. Think back to those Pharisees, they would have said they had it right with God, they believed in him so they were fine. But Jesus condemns them because they say one thing and do another. They are hypocrites, they say do as I say not as I do. They do not live as God would want. They bend the law to suit themselves and they use it to oppress people. James is simply explaining what Jesus taught. He said believe in me and live as I have shown you. The rich man who came to Jesus fell at the first hurdle. He believed in Jesus but when Jesus said, 'sell all you have, give the money to the poor and follow me.' He slunk away. He believed but wasn't prepared to do anything about it.

James condemns those who say, 'I believe' then think that's it I'm ok with God now so I can do as I like. He condemns those who do nothing to live out their faith. No, Christianity is a two way thing. It is belief in Jesus as Christ coupled with living out his teachings in our lives.

¹⁴ 'What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?'

He is not saying faith is not central. He goes on to explain what he means and it follows from his quotation of Jesus' commandment.

¹⁵ 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and 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?'

¹⁷ **So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.'**

James tells it straight, he pulls no punches but what he says is not a contradiction of Jesus teaching it is an illustration of it. James speaks against self-satisfied behaviour that says blow you I am ok so long as I say I believe. Faith in Jesus must be lived out in care for humanity; the two go hand in hand. 'Love God and love your neighbour.' Saying 'keep warm' to someone who is cold or 'enjoy food' to someone who is starving is useless. Do something about it.

James is not saying faith is not central, far from it. Without faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and God we are not Christians and do not accept the freely given grace of God. James is not saying you earn salvation. Christ won that for us at Calvary. What he is saying is that to call yourself Christian means you must have faith in Christ and live your life as he taught. The two must be one.

Our concern must be to study the word of God as given in the scriptures, and as taught by Jesus and to tune our lives to his ways. It isn't enough to behave on the surface as a Christian; the Pharisees looked clean on the outside. Jesus is the God who knows everything, he asks that we search our hearts, see ourselves as we are and then resolve to do our best to live in his way. We begin by showing kindness to people while standing up against all that is wrong. That must be at the heart of Christian behaviour. Love alone can defeat evil as it did at Calvary.

'Brother, sister let me serve you. Let me be as Christ to you; pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.' Richard Gillard.

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