

Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2018 The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity.

**Exorcism, Healing and a new way**

*A sermon preached by the Dean*

Today's Gospel shocks us with what looks like Jesus' harsh treatment of the Syro-Phoenician woman: icy silence, followed by rejection, followed by an insult. And it feels as if his subsequent change of heart has lost some of its power, by what looks like his initial boorishness. But follow me if you will with three moves which will transform this uncomfortable story into one of the most powerful and relevant in all the gospels.

**Move One**

Takes to where Jesus is walking. In border territory, the land of the Canaanites, the land upon whose edge Jesus is walking in today's gospel story, the land in which this woman lives, the land of her ancestors. The Syro Phoenician woman is a hated pagan, a foreigner whose ancestors were driven out of the land when Israel crossed the Jordan after its many years in the wilderness. To put it bluntly, Jesus' ancestors drove out her ancestors and so the context has to be defining for understanding what follows: The root of the mutual loathing between pagans of that territory and Jews of Jesus' time stems from the instruction into the book of Deuteronomy for the children of Israel to have nothing to do with pagan residents in the land.

**Move two**

Brings us to the encounter.

So this Syro Phoenician woman approaches Jesus with her desperate plea. And Jesus meets her in silence.

No one would have been surprised by this at the time. For she is indeed a pagan. It's perhaps only the vision of our own age where religion is sometimes understandably so mistrusted that makes it so hard for us to see religion as placing an effective barrier between human beings.

But it seems that Jesus is clear as to why he will not give her what she wants: she is not a child, deserving of sustenance, but rather a dog on whom one does not waste food intended for true children.

We need not to underestimate what he says. Some have tried to rob his words of their sting by saying that he is really referring to nice house dogs, and that makes it more affectionate than abusive. Rubbish. In Middle Eastern culture a dog is a dog is a dog and calling someone a dog is most definitely not a compliment. The words are what they are. Neither can we filter them through our own very English 21st century love of animals.

But she will not be silenced, does not recoil in offence, and instead retorts wittily and with spirit. And seeing this, Jesus changes his mind, and what she most desperately wants: the healing of her daughter, happens for her.

Why?

Because she changes his mind, and he's convinced by her?

Or because he always knew what he was going to do for her, but was testing her faith? Waiting to see whether indeed she does think of herself as a dog, or whether she has sufficient faith to claim what is most needed?

Both views have their followers, and both make people feel uncomfortable.

The change of mind is hard for those who are most convinced of the divinely indwelt nature of Jesus nature and work. If he is truly the Son of God, and the Spirit of God

moves and works through him, how can he need to change his mind? Even more troubling, how can he hold exclusive and xenophobic views like that in the first place, if he is truly The Son of God, tasked with calling and redeeming all God's children?

The second view: that he already knows what he is going to do for the woman, but is testing her faith, also makes people uncomfortable because it is so unlike his behaviour throughout the gospels.

Jesus does not, it seems, play games with people. He does not toy with them in what even for that time would have seemed humiliating and insulting. Calling her a dog, in her hour of greatest need, in front of his band of followers.

So is there perhaps a third way? A third move in this story?

### **Move Three**

I think that this encounter is an exorcism, a healing of past evil and wounded-ness; a re-naming of who God is to be understood to be.

An exorcism is about a naming of evil, a confrontation with something dark.

The story of the exorcism of Rio Sumpul

And this is echoed in the story of the bronze serpent

Which is itself a forerunner of the story of the cross.

Our darkness is named and healed by our identification with that which has wounded and alienated us.

And that is what Jesus does with this woman.

Standing on the borders of his people's territory, and her pagan territory, he speaks words which his people will have spoken since the time of their ancient history since the time when the tribes of Israel invaded the land, overran the inhabitants, destroyed their cities, massacred everything living things within their borders, because that is what they understood God to want, because they believed that those whose land they were taking were not, in that sense, human, in other words, vermin. And Jesus, in his encounter with the successor to those lost people, standing in the territory where it all happened, allows a moment of exorcism to take place.

And it is brutal, and it is harsh and it is uncompromising,

Because an exorcism has to name that which has been done and must now be healed.

So: nothing for you, you dog.'

And the dog stands her ground and refuses to run away beaten.

And Jesus allows himself to be conquered by her.

You see, if there is an exorcism here, it is she who exorcise him, by refusing to run away at the sound of his words.

And He has put himself in the place where centuries of bitterness can be healed: 'For saying that...for *being* that, you may go', in other words, you are liberated, let go, and so are we. And the demon has gone. What demon? Not, surely, just the demon which held her daughter captive, but the demon which has held them all captive.

The dog, dog no longer, has claimed the dignity of her oppressed ancient race, and from the encounter, the waters of healing flow.

And so we see a new kind of God at work here; not a God of retribution and violence, but a God who works through a foreign pagan woman, encountering a Jewish Rabbi, and as he humbly submits to her words, and the waters of healing roll down, and we see a new kind of God at work.

And do you need me to underline the significance of that story today, in the horrors of the Middle East?

'Be opened' Jesus says to the deaf man with a speech impediment in the next story in today's gospel. 'Be opened', and I wonder if its fair to say that as Jesus has, in placing himself in the place of exorcism, and symbolically opening his people to a new way of understanding their past, and consequently their present and future, allowed himself to be opened, so this second physical story of touch and spit enacts what it might look like, truly to hear, truly to be able to speak without impediment, in this border territory, this liminal space.

This is outrageous stuff, it asks Israel to contemplate a whole new way of understanding itself, a way on which they will encounter pagan women, outsiders, the lepers and unclean, and have to encounter them as fellow, beloved children of God, it is outrageous and offensive to purity codes, to the whole structure of his religion, and that is why he knows full well that when it gets out, they will kill him, will need to kill this outrageous voice. Put an end to it, so for heavens sakes don't tell anyone yet, there is so much to do before the inevitable comes, before the journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

And its still outrageous not just in his own land and territory, but wherever people put themselves in the place of encountering, truly encountering the otherness of others, crossing boundaries and borders, (I wonder if you remember, from a while ago, a story in The Times, of a nameless woman, inhabitant of Qaraqosh in Northern Iraq, overrun by ISIS when they were in their ascendancy, a Sunni Muslim, of the same faith as the pitiless invaders, who I made covert and risky visits to Christians in hiding in the town, in danger of death, to feed them and bring water. The Times reporter smuggled out a report of her words. She took this risk, she said, not just as an act of defiance against the town's new rulers, but also emphatically to separate her religion from theirs: 'not all Sunni Muslims are like ISIS' she says. So her simple and dangerous act serves to exorcise so much of the poison from our hearts in the mistrust so many of us cannot help ourselves feeling towards Islam, as we see brother and sister Christians hunted down and murdered.)

Pray, pray, that the power of stories like hers, stories of creative risk to encounter the humanity of the other will be heard in Washington, in Brussels, in Downing Street, in Tel Aviv, in Gaza, and that they may serve, like that encounter is St Mark's gospel, to exorcise the poison of our present political discourse, of rampant nationalism and hate fuelled propaganda, that all may see God of Abraham of Isaac, of Jacob, and of Jesus of Nazareth, at work in new ways, that all may take hope, and learn to act different.

Amen