

10th Sunday after Trinity

Matthew 15:21-28 and Romans 11:1-2a and 29-32

Being like the Elijah of the Canaanites

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:..
(Merchant of Venice Act 4 Sc 1)

One of the set texts I studied at school was the Merchant of Venice, from which that famous quotation is taken. It was the first thing I thought of when I looked at our Gospel for this morning, because both suggest that to act with mercy offers both a blessing to the person receiving the mercy, AND to the one offering that mercy.

In the reading from Matthew 15, in which our encounter with Jesus might well leave us initially uncomfortable, there is a sense in which Jesus himself is blessed by the act of mercy which he, perhaps grudgingly, gives the Canaanite woman and her daughter. As we consider why that is, we can also think of ways in which the acts of mercy, generosity and goodwill that we offer, can bless us - not as a motivator, but in understanding ourselves as contributors to the 'now and not yet' of the Kingdom of God today.

I rather admire the Canaanite woman; she knows much more about her relationship with Jesus than immediately seems to spring to his mind, or our understanding, and she is both succinct in explaining her request, and pithy in her response to his apparent rudeness.

The disciples take Jesus' silent response to the woman's initial plea as their cue to try and move her on. Jesus affirms this in his comment; "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24, NRSV). His silence, and his apparently racially motivated dismissal of her, jar painfully with the loving, healing God we usually encounter in such circumstances. Yet there may have been good reason for it.

Jesus knew that his relationship with God was signified through his birth as a Jew, a member of the people of Israel, the covenant people, the nation with whom God had developed a special relationship. It was a relationship that had brought the people of Israel considerable hardship and turmoil, and had brought God continual heartache and pain, as they repeatedly lost their faith in him and the long-term plan that would reveal his love for all nations, through them. Jesus was desperate that in the months before his death, the people of Israel should be his priority, for it was in his death that their role in that revelation would find fulfilment. He was silent perhaps largely because in this moment, he didn't feel quite ready for the bigger picture, his ultimate gift to the world, to be revealed.

The Canaanite woman is not however willing to accept this reasoning, or the rudeness associated with it. She is more than capable of giving as good as she gets, since she is perfectly well aware of who he is. After all in her initial words she had signalled that she understood him to be both her Lord, as in her social superior as a man and as a rabbi, and as the Son of David, the long awaited Messiah of the Israelites. The fact was that her people's blood ran through Jesus' veins! If we think back to the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 we are reminded that it includes three women of Jesus' ancestry; three Canaanite women; Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. By referring to Jesus as Son of David, she is reminding him of their shared ancestors - he is her Messiah, as well as the Jewish Messiah!

That's the position of strength from which she comes back at Jesus after he calls her a dog! It is what enables her to return Jesus' rude remarks without rancour and with considerable wit - wish that we could all do that! The woman's cultural context differs from Jesus' and she uses it to her advantage; Canaanites allowed their pets to be fed *while* the children ate. Israel may, quite rightly, be the children which are Jesus' first priority, but that does not negate her determined plea for help, for herself, and for her troubled

daughter. She is quite happy to seek the scraps of God's mercy, until the time is right for the abundance of Easter blessing to be poured upon the whole world at Pentecost. In this way the Canaanite woman brings into that moment the future nature of God's Kingdom.

This is part of something that Paul is seeking to explain more fully in our reading from Romans this morning. As a faithful Jew, and passionate follower of Christ, he is reminding us that even at it's most unfaithful, God graciously always found a remnant of faith in Israel, even if it was the voice of one lone prophet. And, he is only too aware that God does not give his gifts of love for us out of admiration for our achievements - for we are all capable of following false gods, and becoming distracted from the purposes in which God is directing us, just like the people of Israel!

But the remnant, the faithful few, are always important; their voice is the means by which whole nations can return to the rightful relationship with God that is his gift in Jesus. Elijah pleaded with God by reminding him both the failings of Israel and God's own responsibilities to save his people Israel. The Canaanite woman reminds Jesus that whilst he struggles to get that same nation to recognise and understand their long-awaited Messiah, the fulfilment of his mission on earth will come only when the whole world recognises him as the merciful God she knows he is called to be. She is, if you like, the Elijah of the Canaanites.

It is this level of understanding and faith that seems to impress Jesus, and in an effortless and understated healing, he instantaneously grants her prayer. "Let it be done for you as you wish." It is in the woman's clarity of understanding and will that he sees her faith, and it is that which leads to her daughter's healing. That is the blessing that she came to take.

But in it, as he that gives, Jesus is also blessed, for in the mercy he gives, he finds the fulfilment of his ministry clearly recognised; in mercy, he is revealed as the Messiah of both Jew and Gentile. The woman's faith brings with it a glimpse, as of a rising sun through clouds, of the Easter promise that brings about God's new covenant with the whole world, the revelation that the Kingdom of God is not restricted to some distant future, but is incarnate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

So what of us. What does this story tell us of our role in the Kingdom of God?

I hope we don't identify too closely with the disciples, assuming we know what Jesus is thinking and his motivation, and sending people away before they've had a chance to approach him with their own story, and their own understanding of who he is. Our task is to draw people to him, whatever their nationality, need or narrative so that they can seek his mercy face to face, and be blessed.

The person we need to identify with most closely, is the Canaanite woman, to know ourselves to have a special place in God's Kingdom, and thereby have a voice in seeking his mercy for ourselves, and for those who are without a voice, like the woman's daughter. It may be we can do this in something as simple as the persistence of our prayers for those who need to know God's healing touch. But the chances are we are called to a more personal and practical call on God's mercy where we are both the one who calls for it, and offers it in Jesus name. We already work through the Foodbank for those who need the mercy of emergency food provision, but there may be more to it than that. What mercies are required to change the root causes of their hunger, be it marital or mental breakdown, unemployment, debt or lifestyle? Equally there are people who feel themselves to be treated like stray dogs because of the circumstances of their lives, perhaps on the streets, or in hostels, or in refugee camps; where is the mercy with which we seek God's action in their lives?

There are many mercies, and many healings, for which we may need to work, and all of them should point back at who Jesus is. In seeking and providing God's mercy for others, we enable the future to break in on the present, the now and not yet of the Kingdom to be fulfilled in Jesus life with us. As we receive, for ourselves and for others, it is Jesus who is blessed because he is revealed for who he is, the merciful Messiah of us all.