

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Handout for 16 Aug 2020; Prop. 15A

Introduction:

In the present circumstances of the Coronavirus pandemic, when we are unable to hold our Church services, we think of other Christian people all over the world, and especially family and friends who are separated from us. I invite you to use this service in whatever way is best for you. You may like to look up the hymns and read – or sing them. God bless you all.

Gathering Words and Prayer

Today we think about how we treat people we regard as 'outsiders', and how our perceptions and understandings of others can be changed.

We pause for a moment and know that God is close to every one of us.

We open our hearts to God. At the present time, when we are advised to keep our distance from others, we come to meet the God of all peoples, the God who embraces the outsider, who hears the cries of the voiceless, the God who calls on us to help our neighbour.

Call to worship

Gathered in our separate places, yet united in our Christian fellowship, we come to worship the God who brings life and healing to all, joining our voices with the whole church, across the world and across time.

Hymn (1): 198 Let us build a house where love can dwell

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer

Loving, welcoming God,
in our various times and places, separated by 'social distancing',
we thank you and praise you that, in your love,
all barriers are broken down, all people are called by name,
all are made welcome in the fellowship of Jesus.

Living God,
we come to you with our needs and our longings,
conscious of all the barriers that stand in our way:
our own weakness and frailty, our lack of courage, our rejection by others.
We praise you that, in Jesus, you meet us in our weakness;
you give us new confidence and strength,
you welcome us, whoever and whatever we are.
We come, trusting in your love, knowing that in you
our faith is restored, and we are made whole

Welcoming God,
if we ourselves exclude others because of prejudice and fear,
if we value outward show above genuine compassion,
feasting on your goodness, yet grudging others a share in your riches,
if we value our own thoughts and opinions above your truth and your word,
losing sight of the life-changing hope and promise of your Gospel,
we ask your forgiving grace to change our minds and our hearts.

God of fresh starts, help us to wipe the slate clean.
Walk beside us and teach us your ways so that
we may find our lives renewed and transformed by your accepting love.

In all our anxieties and uncertainties,
give us hope that the difficult things will not always be this way;
that even though we walk through the darkest valley,
we need fear no evil, for you are with us.

May we remember that
*"The Kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit
Come, Lord and open in us the gates of your Kingdom"*

We ask in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying:
*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the
power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.*

Hymn (2): 153 Great is thy faithfulness

Readings:

Psalm 67: (NRSV): The Nations Called to Praise God

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Rom. 11: 1-2a and 29-32: Israel's Rejection Is Not Final

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

at v. 29:

The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Hymn (3): 187 There's a wideness in God's mercy

Gospel Reading: Matt 15: 21-28; The Canaanite Woman's Faith

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of

David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

Amen. For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us, for the word of God within us, thanks be to God.

Message

We have been hearing a lot recently about racial prejudice, and today’s story about the Canaanite woman reminds us that discrimination was alive and well in Jesus’s time too. This story tells us a lot about the woman, it tells us a lot about Jesus, and it has important lessons for us.

Both Matthew and Mark tell the story, with subtle differences, but both accounts can be read on at least two levels. The context of the first level shows us an increasingly angry and critical set of confrontations between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees are questioning Jesus’s authority, and he is challenging their understanding of the Law, and so of God. The whole debate is conducted in the language of scriptural interpretation, with each side determined to make its case. Jesus is clear that his mission is a continuation of God’s great missionary outreach in calling the people of Israel, and the Pharisees are determined to show that he is wrong. Enter the Canaanite woman, and the focus changes.

It is a wonderful story, but it is also an uncomfortable story. Maybe we think we shouldn’t say it, but, like the story of the cursing of the fig tree, this story about the Canaanite woman seems to show Jesus in a bad light. We are left with the feeling that, at least initially, Jesus behaved badly. Are there times in the New Testament when Jesus does not seem to live up to our expectations?

A woman in distress comes to Jesus seeking his help, and he insults her. Transfer this situation into modern day, and it is suspiciously like racial abuse. First Jesus ignores her altogether, until the disciples can’t stand her shouting any longer, and ask Jesus to send her away. Then he tells her,
"It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

We all know terms that, not so long ago, were commonly used to refer to people of other races, other skin colour, other religious persuasion, and so on: terms that are now unacceptable. In the same way, ‘dogs’ was a very abusive term used by the Jews to refer to the Gentiles. It was offensive.

Mark’s softer version of the story holds out the possibility that the dogs might get the food after the children have first been fed – i.e. Jew first, then Gentile – but Matthew is more forthright.

Commentators try all kinds of excuses to lessen the impact of Jesus’ abuse of the woman. Perhaps what he said might have been softened by his tone of voice, or by a smile. Some suggest that he was teasing her. Do you tease the desperate mother of a sick child? Or that being called a dog wasn’t all that insulting, that the word used here for dog means little household pets or puppies, rather than the stray dogs that roamed the streets and scavenged in the rubbish heaps – so he is really calling her a puppy. But we learn from other sources that ‘dog’ was a standard Jewish insult of Gentiles, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that Jesus is effectively racially abusing this woman.

All things considered, what do *you* think of this incident?

I think that this is one little insight that shows us the human face of Jesus. It shows us that Jesus could be tired and stressed, that he could be irritated – even very angry, as we know from the story of the Cleansing of the Temple.

Let's look again at the circumstances. First, Jesus seems to be insisting that his mission is only to the Jews. Matthew's Gospel, the most Jewish of the Gospels, is told from the Jewish point of view, with the initial intention of reassuring the Jews that they are still the chosen people of God. Later, especially after the crucifixion, Jesus warns them that they are in danger of losing their favoured place. In John 10:16 we read:

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice". **And that includes us! We are among the beneficiaries!**

Clearly, in the community for whom Matthew was writing, there were many who thought that Christianity was primarily for God's original people, and not for everybody. This was a battle that Paul, in his certainty that he was called to be 'an apostle to the Gentiles', had to fight over and over again.

Secondly, this is the only place where we hear of Jesus going outside Jewish territory. He went there quite deliberately. He realised that the end was near, and he needed some time, a bit of peace and quiet, not only to prepare himself, but also to prepare his disciples, for what was to come. There was no place in Palestine where he could be sure of some privacy, or find safety from the hostility of the scribes and Pharisees, or from the dangerous popularity of the crowds, so he went right up north through Galilee into Gentile territory where no Jew would be likely to follow him. Yet even here Jesus could not escape the demands of human need.

This was a remarkable woman who approached him. She must have been desperate. Her daughter was seriously ill, and she must have heard of the wonderful things that Jesus could do. Never mind that she belonged to a race of people who were the ancestral enemies of the Jews. Never mind that it was not the "done thing" for a woman to approach a man in this way. This woman was motivated by a love for her child that made her approach this stranger, and suffer his initial rejection. It was love that made her persist in the face of Jesus' reluctance, and the disciples' irritation.

The woman must have had faith, faith enough to take the risk of being turned away. She acknowledges Jesus' status by addressing him as "Son of David". Faith such that even Jesus acknowledges it. She is clever too. She engages in a bit of repartee, what we might call banter. *She answers Jesus back* – and he appreciates it. She has every right to be offended, but she accepts the offensive label as long as she anticipates that she can get "the leftovers that fall from their masters' table." She is ahead of her time: she is pushing into the kingdom of God from outside.

This story tells us a lot about the human side of Jesus. The Jesus that suffers from stress, and reacts to it – the Jesus that could be nervy and irritable. We see too the Jesus with a sense of humour, and the enjoyment of a bit of banter. It shows us the *you and me* in Jesus. Much more importantly, it shows us that, having behaved badly, Jesus learns quickly from his mistake, and puts matters right. Maybe that's one of the ways where we fall short. It isn't a sin to be wrong, or even to be prejudiced. That's part of being human. It's part of learning. It becomes a sin only if you obstinately continue once you have been enlightened.

Jesus learns here that it is possible for a foreign woman, who worships a foreign God, to teach him something important. This little incident helps Jesus towards a fuller realisation of

the scope of his mission beyond all boundaries of race or creed; to remember, or to realise, that his mission extends not only to the Jews, but to the world . Not only women, not only foreigners, even those traditionally thought to be God's enemies, can be welcomed into the kingdom of God. "*Great is your faith!*" he tells her, and her child is healed, not by a dramatic cure, but by the spoken word – and here we have an echo of the healing of another foreigner – the healing of the centurion's servant.

This story had a very important message for Matthew's community, a community made up of mainly Jewish Christians, divided over the admission of non-Jewish converts, a community where many believed that Christianity was primarily for God's chosen people.

Here is the justification for the inclusion of all races and nationalities. Not only did Jesus heal gentiles, he entered theological debate with them, and was won over by them. It was vital for both Christians and Jews, and it is vital for us, to remember that God includes us all in his great plan for salvation.

The lessons for us here in Orkney today?

There is the lesson not to give up on our prayers when there seems to be no response. The Canaanite woman refused to give up or to be put off. Jesus emphasises elsewhere that we should be persistent in prayer.

She has faith and sincerity. She comes to Jesus in absolute sincerity, in deadly earnest, in a burning sense of need, and a single-minded refusal to be discouraged.

This woman is humble – and increasingly humble. She starts by shouting at Jesus in the road, and finishes on her knees at his feet.

Somehow, through it all, the woman was able to smile in the midst of her troubles. Passionately earnest, desperately hoping, yet with the light of faith, she came to Jesus in audacious love, risking everything. She brought the beginnings of a faith that grew until it worshipped at the feet of the divine. She brought a duggit persistence rising from unconquerable hope, and she brought a cheerfulness that would not be dismayed.

Love. Faith. Hope. Persistence. Cheerful expectation.
Here is the approach that cannot help finding an answer to its prayers.
Here is encouragement for us all in our time and circumstances.

Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

(Offering) Hymn (4) 724 Christ's is the world in which we move

Dedication of Offering

Gracious God,
in the face of poverty and misery and need throughout the world,
we are conscious of your generosity towards us.

All we have comes from you.

As we offer to you tokens of our work and our prosperity, bless us in the giving,
and bless our gifts that they may be used to advance your work in the Church and in the world. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving, welcoming God,
from the relative security of our own lives
we bring our prayers for all who are in need.

We pray for those who are the outsiders in our society:
for those in poverty,
those surviving on the crumbs and scraps of other people's riches.
We pray for those who are denied the basics of living:
food and water, shelter, housing, or healthcare.
We pray for Yemen and Syria, Africa, and Latin America, and many other parts of the world
where the Covid pandemic is superimposed on famine,
and remembering the people of Beirut, where disaster has come on top of disease.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

We pray for those who have no place of safety,
for refugees and asylum seekers, still trying desperately to reach safer countries;
those who have no home to call their own.
God of the outsider,
we pray that you will bring healing and welcome to all.
We bring our prayers for those who are denied a voice,
or whose voices are silenced by the denial of human rights and freedom of speech.

We pray for people excluded and pushed aside,
mocked, insulted or abused for their race, their religion, their gender or sexuality.
God of the voiceless,
we pray that you will give power and hope to all.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Faithful God,
we pray for all those who struggle with faith,
and for those for whom faith is lifeless, stifled by rules and regulations,
that their darkness and doubts may be illuminated by the light of your love.
Hear all those who cry out to you in desperation,
feeling that their prayers are unanswered,
that they may come to see your power at work in their lives.

God of the gospel,
we pray that you will give living, life-changing faith to all.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

Compassionate God,
we bring before you all those who are sick, or in pain;
those who are worried, or afraid;
those who know that their time is short;
those struggling in the grief and desolation of bereavement;
We remember everyone affected by the train derailment near Stonehaven;
all who are in any kind of need today,
especially those who are known to us

Pause

In the name of the Christ who brings welcome, hope and change,

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

In the Jesus' name we ask. Amen

Closing Hymn(5) 622 We sing a love that sets all people free

Closing Words and Benediction

May we know that the blessing of God,
the loving kindness of Jesus,
and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to be with us all,
women and men, friends and strangers, of all faiths, and of no faith.
May you stay safe in the way of Christ,
and may you be blessed by his Spirit, today and always;
and the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son, Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you, now and always. Amen.

Doxology:

May God's blessing surround you each day, As you trust Him and walk in his way,
May his presence within guard and keep you from sin, Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.