

Sunday 20th August

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:10-28

Have you ever had that experience where you hear someone saying something that seems to be totally out of character? Perhaps a person you've always known as calm and unflappable suddenly losing it and shouting at someone, or maybe the other way around. Someone you've always known as fiery and outspoken being tender and caring.

I think it feels a bit like that as we read today's gospel from Matthew 15.

It appears that not only is Jesus – loving, caring, generous, welcoming Jesus - refusing to help this woman whose daughter is suffering, but he also uses some rather offensive language as he sends her on her way. Just what is going on?

As we seek to answer that question, let's have a quick look at where this reading comes in the gospel story. Like all the gospel writers, Matthew does not place the stories and events in a random sequence. There is method in the organisation. So what comes before and what comes after this incident?

In the previous verses in this chapter Jesus is in debate with the religious leaders about Jewish purity laws – rules about ceremonial washing and so forth. In his responses to them and in the discussion with his disciples which followed (the first part of our gospel reading today) Jesus looks at the bigger picture.

What's the point, he says, of slavishly sticking to rules if that doesn't affect the way you live. Jesus uses the example of foods. In Jewish law and tradition some foods were unclean, but here Jesus is saying it's not the food that is unclean (what goes into the mouth), rather what defiles someone, what defines what they are really like, is how they behave – what they say, what they do, how they relate to others. This would indeed be radical teaching – asking huge questions about the things that have underpinned Jewish life. Had they got it all wrong?

And then this Canaanite woman approaches him. This Gentile. This outsider.

Perhaps, far from being rude and dismissive, Jesus is using her approach to show those around him what he means. To show them the bigger picture of what life can be like – of what God is like. To show them that we limit God at our peril. To show them obedience to the rules is meaningless without the lives that back it up. To show them that over the centuries the Jewish people had got it wrong. Being the chosen people of God was not about how wonderful they were, but about showing the wonder and love of God to the whole world.

So when the woman approaches, when she starts shouting at him about her daughter and begging him to heal her, and when she persists to such an extent that the disciples urge Jesus to send her away because of the noise she is making and the disruption she is causing, Jesus responds in the way they would expect. He tells her – in effect – that he has just come to bring healing and

wholeness to the Jews, God's chosen people. *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*

And, when he uses the word 'dogs' to refer to the gentiles, *It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs*, perhaps he is using that kind of language to make a point to the disciples and others who are listening about how wrong such attitudes can be. Those words sound totally out of place coming from the mouth of Jesus – surely because they are so wrong. So perhaps his words were about saying to the disciples – the attitude you have, the vision of God you have just cannot be right. Because the disciples, like the religious leaders, could not see beyond the rules which reinforced the view that God was the God of the Jews alone, whereas the plan was always for the Jews to show God and proclaim him to the world.

The woman persists, her witty riposte clearly impresses Jesus who then heals her daughter. A woman is satisfied; a daughter is healed and the disciples' eyes are opened.

So even in Matthew's gospel – often seen as the most Jewish focussed of the gospels – Jesus shows God's concern for all people, not just the Jews. Right at the start of the gospel foreigners – the Magi or Kings – come to worship him; in chapter 8 Jesus heals a centurion's servant; at the end of the gospel he tells his followers to make disciples of all nations. And some will interpret the fact that there are two miraculous feedings – of 5000 and 4000 – to indicate similar truths. When 5000 were fed there were 12 baskets of food left over – 12 representing the tribes of Israel; when 4000 people were fed there were 7 baskets left over – 7 for completeness or the 7 days of creation, representing the whole world. This message is not just for the Jews, it is for everyone. No-one is excluded.

Which actually fulfils the prophecy we heard in the Isaiah reading. *my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.* This is what Paul is emphasising too in his letter to the Romans. This is what Peter and Paul and the early church struggled with – the radical and perhaps surprising truth that God loves all people and calls all people and wants us all to be in relationship with him.

But surely there are no barriers in our churches. Yes, there have been in the past. For example I recall when I was a curate in inner London talking to some of our West Indian church members who told me that when they first came to this country (as part of the Windrush generation) they tried to attend their local parish church but were firmly told they were not welcome; their church was elsewhere. But surely things are different now.

Yes, things have improved, but they are far from perfect. Racism is still here in our churches. Perhaps not quite so obvious but present just the same.

And its not just racism.

What Jesus is saying here is that all are welcome. All. Everyone. From different races, backgrounds, orientations, interests. All are welcome.

If we look at the story of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles we can see how welcoming gentiles into the church community presented enormous challenges to the original Jewish disciples. The church had to change because of the new people it welcomed. Previously held assumptions and customs had to change. Ways of doing things had to change. Ways of being

church had to change. But with that change came new learning, new insights. We can see the working out of this through Acts and the New Testament letters. It was difficult and sometimes painful – but also enriching and fulfilling.

And it will be similar for us as we welcome others from different backgrounds and traditions. A true welcome will give space and opportunity for newcomers to ask questions, to get involved in the activities of the church, maybe even to take on roles that others have been doing for some time, to make a difference as they use their God-given skills and abilities. Space to bring their wisdom and insight to help us all grow in our faith. True welcome does not welcome people into the church as it has always been, but embraces them to help create the church as it could become.

I don't suppose those religious leaders in Jesus' day or his disciples were bad people. They probably thought that they were doing the right thing in adhering to the rules and not allowing the gentiles to take an equal place. It took this desperate and pushy woman, and the way Jesus welcomed her to enable them to see a greater truth.

As Jesus welcomed the woman, he also and calls us to extend his invitation and welcome to people of all nations, colours, incomes, orientations, and any other distinctions that we may decide to get hung up about. And not only does he welcome us, he says to us "I have called you by name – you are mine." You all belong.