14th Sunday After Trinity: Mark 7:24-end.

On a few ocassions, at the end of the service, I have forgotten to turn off my microphone, which means my conversations have been broadcast to everyone inside church. Thankfully, you’re all very kind and if I have said something terrible you have not held it against me.

And today’s reading is one that we might think Jesus’ would wish hadn’t been recorded either, because at first glance it doesn’t show him in the best light. A Daily Mail headline might read; “Son of God calls foreign woman a dog, before spitting at a deaf-man.” That’s pretty hard for any PR team to put a positive spin on. And certainly not the behaviour you’d imagine from God in the flesh.

BUT I want us to consider that in both of Jesus’ encounters, first with the Syrophoenecian woman and then with the deaf-man, we are shown the truth that God brings about transformation through the messiness of the world, not by circumventing it. God meets us where we are, and moves things forward from there.

Today’s gospel reading begins with Jesus in Gentile territory, in the region of Tyre and Sidon, cities in Phoenecia, which is part of modern day Syria. The previous week’s gospel spoke of Jesus challenging the distinction between clean and unclean foods. And today we have a deeper parallel, as Jesus’ presence here wipes out the difference between clean and unclean *people*.

For just as in Jewish custom a person would never risk being tainted by eating forbidden foods, so too they wouldn’t risk tarnishing themselves by contact with “unclean” non-Jewish people.

But you might already be thinking, Jesus doesn’t exactly challenge this distinction, if anything, in his response to the woman he *perpetuates it*! “It is not right to take the bread that belongs to the children and throw it to the dogs” he replies to her.

Here we might interpret this passage as a marginalised person, a woman with an apparently “demonic daughter” *showing Jesus a better way*. Is it not the case that her response teaches Jesus to be more Jesus-y?? Does she not encourage Jesus to be *more tolerant*, *more inclusive*, more in line with *our* enlightened modern values?

Perhaps. But I think, actually, this is one of those occasions where if we read the text too earnestly and seriously, we miss what is going on; we miss Jesus’ humour and irony. Personally, I think it’s only really possible to read this passage by imagining Jesus uttering his response with a gentle smile on his face.

Because Jesus is *already* in this supposedly unclean territory, *already* mixing with supposedly unclean people. Any sense of untouched purity has been long abandoned. And even more so, two chapters earlier, we have *already* heard that Jesus has been involved in the healing of the Gerasene, non-Jewish, man. So, it seems a much more accurate reading to see Jesus as playing a kindly provocateur. Inviting the woman to puncture the notion that God’s salvation is only for the Jews, through her own wit and reasoned response.

Jesus’ offers her the accepted Jewish narrative as an allegory, and she is invited to extend this allegory so that she and her daughter have a place in it too! Jesus begins with the located, Jewish narrative, as a place from which to move towards a boundary-crossing narrative.

God doesn’t violently impose his Kingdom on us from on high, as foreign implantation, completely unrooted from any reality we know or can grasp. God doesn’t seek to *replace* the world with heaven in cataclysmic upheaval. Nor transform the world from a distance, by clicking his fingers, but patiently, through the lifetime of a human being: Jesus of Nazareth.

And we see this clearly in the second healing. Jesus doesn’t just march in and start shouting or speaking in the deaf-man’s face, or snap his fingers to heal him before he’s had any understanding of what’s going on. Rather, Jesus compassionately and considerately takes *time*, and takes him aside from the crowds, by himself.

Jesus explains what he is doing through physical action so the deaf man can learn what is going on; Jesus physically puts his hands to the man’s ears, he indicates his intention to heal by using spittle (as this was seen to have a curing quality), then Jesus looks up to heaven to indicate that this power is from God, and then he mouths “Be Opened” for the healing of the man’s deafness.

Jesus’ meets this person where he is. He doesn’t stroll round performing miracles by zapping power from his fingers like bolts of lightning. This was the temptation of Satan in the wilderness– just jump from this building, display your power unambiguously, then everyone will believe you… it will save you a lot of time! But Jesus meets us, not in the imaginary, magic world, but in the reality of *this* world, as it *really is*, as we *really are*.

At the end of university, I remember going through a searching time in my faith, questioning God’s existence. I had been praying especially for God to somehow show himself to me in a really clear way. I was also doing a lot of cycling at the time, and one bike ride I went on I set-off from home quite late in the afternoon, without a phone or much else, and did a route that took me about 25 miles away, and pretty much, just after I had climbed up and come down a hill at the furthest point from home, I soon realised I had a puncture. In the middle of rural Shropshire. No puncture repair kit, no phone, and miles from anywhere..

So, I thought this would be a good opportunity to put God to the test again, so I prayed for God to do something about the situation I found myself in, and having started jogging whilst holding my bike I thought “you know what, if God is all-powerful and all-mighty, there is absolutely no reason why he can’t just re-inflate my punctured tyre!” So in a leap of faith, I jumped back on my bike- in full expectation it had been repaired from on high.. AND… nothing had changed..

So, I carried on walking with my bike in hand in the vague direction of home, feeling very sorry for myself, along the deserted country lane– wondering how on earth I was going to get home before midnight. Then about 5minutes later, a car drove past me, and stops about 10m ahead. He gets out, opens up his boot and it turns out he’s got a spare inner-tube and pump in the back of his car! So, he helps me repair my bike and I was able to cycle home the rest of the way.

Here I believe God heard and answered my prayer. But not in the act of magic I was demanding. God met me and transformed things where I was, in the reality of the world, in all my self-pity and scepticism, through the kindness of a stranger. Of course, we believe in a God who can do unimaginable things, things that change the face of the world, but as God in Christ shows us, he transforms the world *through* his world.

And so to return to our gospel readings, the crowd see that in Jesus’ healing he has “done well.” An echo of the Genesis account, as God looks at his creation and declares it to have been “done well.” Here we see Jesus installing the *new* creation, bringing healing and reconciliation, in the midst of the pain and suffering of the world.

So how do *we* open ourselves up to participating in God’s new creation? It is by starting *where we are.* Not in some imagined ideal scenario or situation, but where we are, and as we are.

If you’re anything like me, you’ll often think I just need to sort myself out in such and such a way, then God will be able to use me properly.

But, as Rowan Williams writes, “Holiness doesn’t begin tomorrow or over there or with that person, not this; it doesn’t begin with that church, not this.”[[1]](#footnote-1) God can only ever speak to us now. In this moment, as we are, with all our faults and flaws.

God urges us to find him, to see him at work, even in the mess we find ourselves in– the mess we make for ourselves, and the mess we find ourselves entangled in by others. It is here, and only here, in the reality of our broken world that God can, bit by bit, draw us out of our prejudices and our deafness. That we might see and hear that God is with us and making all things well. Amen.

1. Silence and Honey Cakes, p96 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)