

Taking another look...

Isaiah 56:1,6-8

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

So – I wonder what we make of this morning’s Gospel reading? Of a woman approaching Jesus, asking for healing for her daughter – and the response she gets from Jesus?

Two thoughts spring into my mind

Firstly, that on a morning when Lionesses are at the forefront of many people’s minds, that this Mum demonstrates the legendary ferocity and tenacity of female lions when they are protecting their cubs.

And secondly – ***what???***

For on first reading it seems that Jesus initially ignores her, then is dismissive, and finally is downright offensive, with his comments about throwing food ‘to the dogs’.

Is this what God is *really* like when someone desperate comes to him for help? If so, no wonder people are turning their back on God too.

But hang on a minute. I think this story is worth a second look – to try to see what is really going on, and then of course, to think about what it might have to say to us here today.

So - why do I think there may be another way of looking at this narrative?

A couple of reasons – firstly it’s so out of character for Jesus. Yes, the woman is a Canaanite – not Jewish, not part of the people of God. And yet John’s gospel dedicates a whole chapter to a Samaritan woman who met Jesus by a well – and she was also outside the Jewish community. And earlier in Matthew’s gospel we read of Jesus responding to a Centurion’s request and healing his servant, just by saying the word. And the centurion *definitely* wasn’t one of the people of God. He too was a Gentile (a non-Jew) and a Roman to boot.

And secondly, if Jesus only wanted to engage with the people of Israel, what on earth was he doing in Tyre and Sidon? They were well outside the recognised borders. If we think of Shirley Parish as Israel, with St James/CtK as Jerusalem, then Galilee would be up beyond Poppy Island, and Tyre and Sidon would be over towards Highters Heath and the Maypole. Not only outside the borders of the parish, but a definite detour.

So let’s propose an alternative reading

Jesus is aware of the words of Isaiah and the psalm which we read earlier – both of which refer to how non-Jews/all the nations will become part of God’s kingdom. (Which was always the plan if you recall – Abraham’s call was to be the founder of a nation which would demonstrate God’s love and glory to the rest of the world, not to become the ancestor of a super-power with God as its prime weapon.)

So Jesus is aware of this – and wants to be sure that his disciples are also aware of it. After all, after Jesus returns to heaven they are going to be responsible for taking the gospel “to all nations” – so they really need to get it.

So when the woman calls to Jesus, he waits to see what the disciples’ response will be. And as she keeps calling, he finds out – far from wanting to include her, they want to get rid of her.

And then he responds in a way which is intended to shock them into realising their error. It is a technique he’s used before – in the Sermon on the Mount he talks about his followers tearing their own eyes out if looking at something causes them to sin – it’s not meant to be taken literally.

And similarly here, his words are not intended to be taken at face-value - as demonstrated by the fact that he does then respond to her words of faith and the daughter is instantly healed.

His apparently harsh words are deliberately exaggerated to shock his disciples and to make a point – the point that it is *not* God-like to turn away from someone just because they have a different background. And that it *is* God’s plan that all people who recognise him will be united in his kingdom.

After all, the woman started by saying “Lord, Son of David...” She recognised who Jesus was right from the beginning.

Far from a story about Jesus rejecting someone in need because they are an outsider, it is a lesson to all his followers to remind us that God’s will is for *all people* to be welcomed into the kingdom.

And just as well, we might say – as otherwise any of us who are not of Jewish heritage would not be part of it either.

So what does it say to us about welcome? After all, we are actually a pretty welcoming church community. Anyone who walks through the doors is pretty much guaranteed to be smiled at, supported, talked to, offered a cup of coffee, and invited to come again.

But hang on a minute. Is that all that there is to ‘welcome’? I wonder if those who have welcomed Ukrainian refugees into their homes – like Wendy – have found that true ‘welcome’ looks like that?

Because I realise in myself that I am very happy to welcome anyone – so long as they ‘join’ on my terms. Follow what I consider to be *our* (my?) way of doing things. Even like the things I like (and vice versa)?

And I wonder if I am alone in that? I suspect not.

It's very easy to be fearful of loss, as old familiar ways decline, and new ways of being and doing arise. It's very easy to see it all as a challenge to our own identity – whether we're considering a church perspective, a neighbourhood one, or a national or international one.

But for now, let's just explore this from a church perspective.

A wise Vicar once said to their congregation – “every time someone new joins a church, that church should change”. Rather than expecting new arrivals to ‘conform’ to our way of doing things, we should expect to ‘transform’ – to make space for them, receive what they bring, be open to different ways – and so subtly change as they move from ‘being welcomed’ to ‘belonging’.

Because ultimately isn't that what we all seek? To belong? To belong to the Church community. To belong to the people of God? To belong to God.

And one more thing strikes me about this welcoming / changing thing. As we change, we can often discover new, positive, lovely things that we had no idea about before.

Last weekend my elder son and his family came to stay. For reasons too complex to go into my daughter-in-law is currently having to follow a cows' milk free diet. So off I went to the supermarket to find dairy-free stuff. The thought of dairy-free ice cream was a bit – *yuk* – but I bought some anyway, and duly brought it out at pudding time. Sophie's face lit up - it's hard watching everyone else eat ice-cream if you can't have it – and in a sense it was worth getting it just to see her delight. But guess what – I tried some. And it was de-li-cious.

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So Jesus welcomes us as we respond to his invitation to belong to him. He calls us to extend his invitation and welcome to people of all nations, colours, incomes, orientations, and any other distinctions that we human creatures 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 belong.