

Sunday 20 August 2017.

Isaiah 56:1,6-8 and Matthew 15:21-28

So, was Jesus racist? Quite a contemporary question.

We believe that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, but somehow we recoil from this gospel reading where he seems to be only too human, to be arrogant, to be racist and to be verging on the cruel.

We live in an age where despite a widespread belief that all humans are equal, irrespective of race and colour, of background, of language or culture, there is still much prejudice, much hatred and suspicion to be overcome.

We can read this passage on the surface as if Jesus is refusing to help someone in need simply because she is from the wrong race.

Jesus had travelled to Tyre and Sidon, outside the area settled by the Jews. So he would have expected to have met with gentiles. Matthew calls the woman a Canaanite. Now that's a word we know from the Old Testament, a tribe that was a traditional enemy of the Jews, but by Jesus' time it wasn't a word that was used. It would be like me saying my sister lives in Aqua Sulis when really she lives in Bath. So Matthew is presenting this woman, not just as a foreigner, a stranger but as an enemy.

And Jesus's ministry wasn't as an itinerant healer. He had a specific mission. And first and foremost it was to make the Kingdom of God known to God's chosen people, to Israel. His work was by and large limited to them. He wants above all to rescue them.

When he eventually agrees to hear her, his language is harsh, he says: 'it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. The children are the Jewish people and 'dogs' is the abusive word used for the gentiles, non-Jewish people. Amazingly, she doesn't object to his choice of words, but notes that even the dogs will share scraps from the table. It's as if she is seeing beyond the cross and seeing that Jesus' death and resurrection will open up God's kingdom to everyone whatever their race. That God's love is great enough to include everyone who seeks out Jesus.

And Jesus sees what she sees. It's almost as she catches him by surprise. And he listens to what she is asking for.

Maybe he shouldn't have been so surprised. The reading from Isaiah tells us that the foreigners and strangers will be gathered, will be brought to God's holy mountain and will be made joyful in his house of prayer.

This part of Isaiah is written at the time when the first people returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. The time written of in Ezra and Nehemiah. Jerusalem was still occupied a part of the Persian Empire and those returning were met by suspicion and hostility by their neighbours. The practice of injustice had previously brought Israel to ruin, their practice of religion had become divorced from social responsibility and they were now being given a new start.

God of course still has the same passionate commitment to justice and expects them to share in it. Verse 1 says: 'Maintain justice and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance will be revealed'. And as part of the justice, so foreigners and strangers who and commit themselves to God will gathered in.

Yet that gathering in only began in earnest after Jesus' death, resurrection and the great commission he gave to make disciples of all nations. The woman in the gospel reading was just ahead of the game in what she was asking.

Well I say she 'asked'. She badgered more like. She shouted, she didn't stop.

What should we ask for today? What should we be badgering God about today? I've read that at the time of Wilberforce there were many who agreed that slavery was wrong and yet felt the time wasn't right to do anything about it. William Wilberforce and his friends prayed continually, badgering God as well as protesting in Parliament, that what needed to be done in the future needed to be done in the present as well.

We can badger God about the things we see that must offend against God's sense of justice. We can and should pray about modern slavery, about racism, about terrorism, we shouldn't tolerate them. We can pray not to be afraid of the stranger, and gather them in, just as God promises in Isaiah. The world seems so dark, we can feel anxious and helpless, what can we do? While the answer on a big scale is more often than not 'nothing', that doesn't have to be the answer on the smaller scale. We can choose to want to be part of the transformation of the world. Prayer for places and situations, and blessing places and people can be very powerful.

What specifically did the woman badger Jesus about? Her daughter was sick. Jesus healed her.

We can pray for those who are sick.

We know amongst our families, our friends, neighbours and colleagues those who need Christ's healing touch. Those who have a special need to experience wholeness. We offer simple prayers for anyone who wants that today in our 9.45 service. And also at our 10.30 Thursday service. If you haven't already seen it, the August newslines has more information about the ministry of healing. There are still copies at the back if you haven't seen it.

And is not the world sick too?

Apart from all that you can read and hear in the news, may I commend to your prayers the situation in South Sudan and Northern Uganda. Our friends in Northern Uganda, having hardly themselves started to recover from years of civil war are now hosting huge camps of refugees from South Sudan. The psalm for today, Psalm 67 asks that God be gracious to us and to bless us, to make his face shine upon us, so that his saving power will be known among all nations. And that the nations will be healed.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 20 August 2017