

St James' Church, Weybridge

Proper 18 – Trinity 15 – Sermon Notes

Today's Readings

First Reading Isaiah 35:4-7a

God promises to redeem Israel, and the prophet portrays the signs of God's presence.

Gospel Mark 7:24-37

Jesus travels into Gentile country, where he performs two miracles: the healing of the Syrophenician woman's daughter and of the man who is deaf and has a speech impediment.

HOMILY

"Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter." (Mark 7:26)

I can't stand Mess – sorry but it's true. I wouldn't say I was obsessed with it, or OCD, and if you have seen my study recently you may question my commitment to order, but I do love things to be tidy, neat and organized. I shouldn't be surprised, because I have a dreadful short-term memory, so being organized helps me to remember where things are. Then, when I look at the world around me, I am reminded that nothing is as organized as I perhaps once thought.

Yes, there is order, incredible order and complexity. And at Faith Confirmed this week, we will begin by looking at the world and asking if it could have been possible for such an interwoven and diverse planet to have happened by accident? I don't think so, because I believe God as creator made everything and is still busy creating and re-creating and thank goodness for that. Thank heavens for God's order!

Then I ponder the diversity of Creation and our part in caring for it. Oh dear, what a mess we human beings are making of it. We only must look at the mess of climate change, turning weather and so much more upside down, making the usually predictable world a little less certain.

We have the gift of life in a world so wonderfully ordered, by God, yet so fragile all the same as we pollute and challenge complex echo systems to their limit – yes even too extinction. Because we exploit, use and conquer. But that is not God’s loving way, which calls us to reconcile and care, or as the Anglican 5 marks of mission remind us, to tend. We do this while also challenging unjust structures that we, human beings have created over time.

Remember, God with us, Jesus, knows what it is to be human, to be both unique and wonderful, but also tempted too. For there is the *messiness* of incarnation: Incarnation is one of those ‘theological’ words that simply means, God becoming a human – one of us. So, what of this God made man, Jesus?

He teaches in public and private, in the streets, on hillsides and synagogues, in the temple and even at dinner tables in people’s homes. He shares faith and breaks bread all at once, speaking on different levels to different people. Add in his miracles; healings and the offer of new life, and his continual run-ins with the religious authorities of his day and his rejection of old barriers and taboos: all these are interwoven in patterns of visibility and secrecy which can leave us deeply bewildered – what a mess!

It is not just that some things are public and some private: we also see Jesus demanding secrecy and not getting it; or even meeting outright challenge and he can’t seem to go anywhere without being noticed! (Mark 7:24) Our Lord responds to the messiness of the world and in so

doing he walks with and reaches out to different people and their needs in unique ways.

Rather than judging, he recognises their real, physical and spiritual need and offers healing – God’s love. As members of the Church, the body of Christ today, we are called to follow his example and reach out into the mess of the world today and bring his ministry, his healing presence, his love to others – to a planet in need of a tidy up - however inadequate we feel our efforts are as we journey life’s road of discovery and faith. We are called to recognize his love in the lives of others and celebrate it.

In a world of so much chaos, Jesus brings calm, and we, his church today is to bring that calm also. We do this by allowing Jesus, his love, his teaching and his ministry to work through us, our lives, and our church.

This is what mission is all about; taking the message of the Gospel of love that we hear and read every Sunday out into the world and sharing it through our daily living. This Gospel is not about the black and white of extreme ideology, but rather the grey space of everyday life.

This is the mission of living lives as disciples and making decisions that will help to heal our world: seeking to be Christ-like, giving of ourselves and emptying ourselves in the service of others. This involves inviting others to come alongside us in friendship, as we walk together the journey of life and faith. This is a Gospel of love, and action, not judging passivity.

This is to offer a glimpse of the Gospel of welcome and challenge. This world needs mission, however messy it gets. And as we journey the path of life and faith, we may meet a woman, like our Lord did, who dares us to break taboos further.

Jesus words to the *“Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take*

the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7: 27) jar with us today and so they should because he was using a traditional phrase of the time, to describe those who were Gentiles – people like you and I – and his comment is meant for those whom he desires to challenge, the religious leaders of his day. But her response is brilliant and cuts through the messiness of this situation, *"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* (Mark 7: 28)

Remember, Jesus doesn't ignore the Syrophenician woman or her request; her daughter is healed because she trusts – she has faith. Our Lord meets many needs, gets involved in the mess of our human existence and brings healing and wholeness to those who trust in him, who come before him with love in their hearts as they are, open, honest, faithful.

He comes into the messiness of our world bringing challenge, order, forgiveness and utter love which overflows for all people, you and I also.

Jesus reaches out to a Gentile woman who recognised his power. Likewise, he reaches out to all people today - Yes, all people, you and me too. The Gospel reveals an approach which demonstrates the limitless love of God – which is not restricted by barriers of attitudes or intolerance, or the moral divisions of the past.

Today's Gospel is a challenge to each of us! Being able to live together, work together, even worship together depends on being confident in our own faith and being able to respect the messiness of the world in which we live, the grey spaces, while we recognise the order that God brings through Jesus.

As we journey through life and faith, we must be careful to respect the different beliefs and practises of others, not least within the church here in Weybridge. Cultural variation is of great value when we, in God's

terms, recognise the worth of an individual whatever their race, nationality, background, gender, sexuality or faith.

We are all on a journey through the messiness, and we should be willing to walk with those who are struggling, help all navigate this life, offering the faith we have and the hope that only Jesus, our Lord of life and love offers. Amen.

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, September 2024.