

## **A reflection for 16<sup>th</sup> August, 2020, the 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity.**

### **Opening prayer:**

Lord of heaven and earth,  
as Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer,  
give us patience and courage never to lose hope,  
but always to bring our prayers before you;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

### **Readings:**

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

### **Reflection:**

The “Me Too” movement arose in 2006, initiated by Tarana Burke as a protest against the sexual harassment of women. It came to greater prominence in 2017 with the accusations by several women of sexual abuse by the film producer Harvey Weinstein. More recently it has widened its scope so that its founder, Tarana Burke, now defines it as “an international movement for justice for marginalized people in marginalized communities.”

One could almost use the same definition to describe the Black Lives Matter movement, although its principle focus is on people of colour.

What lies at the heart of both movements and others like them, such as the Refugee Council or Disability Rights UK, is a demand for equality and justice.

And a similar demand for equality and justice lies at the heart of our two readings this week.

Last week, Hazel focused on salvation and today’s reading from Isaiah begins in exactly the same way:

Maintain justice  
and do what is right,  
for my salvation is close at hand  
and my righteousness will soon be revealed,

says God, speaking through Isaiah.

Now it's important to note that Isaiah is not inviting people to seek salvation through righteous works but rather calling them to live the life that God has revealed as being right. This is not offered as a means of salvation, but rather as a characteristic of those awaiting salvation. Salvation, as Zacchaeus learned last week, is a free gift of God, not something that can be earned. If we had to earn our salvation, few if any of us would be saved, for as St Paul wrote, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But in gratitude for our salvation, God expects us to live lives in which we maintain justice and do what is right.

Isaiah, of course, was writing principally in relation to salvation for the Jews, but in the rest of our reading today he spreads the net wider, with our second verse, actually verse 6 specifically referring to "foreigners."

Those who keep God's commandments, who love and worship Him, whether they be Jew or Gentile, will be welcomed into his temple, his house of prayer.

And God goes on to define his house as a "house of prayer *for all nations.*"

It was partly the failure of the Jews to recognise their responsibility to share their understanding of God with the nations around them, to play their part in fulfilling God's promise to Abraham that through his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed and their failure to welcome the foreigner that so angered Jesus when he entered the Temple in Jerusalem and turned over the tables of the money changers and the animal sellers.

Indeed as he did it, Jesus quoted Isaiah, saying, "Is it not written:

'My house will be called  
a house of prayer for all  
nations?'

But you have made it a 'den of robbers.'

What particularly displeased Jesus was that the part of the Temple where the money changers and animal sellers had their stall was in the Court of The Gentiles, the only part of the Temple which foreigners, non- Jews, could

access. The Temple authorities were making a total mockery of Isaiah's prophecy.

God had fulfilled his part of the prophecy in 537 BC in, as Isaiah says, gathering the Jewish exiles from the Babylonian exile of around 600 BC, but the Jews had made it difficult for the second part of the prophesy to be fulfilled: "I will gather still others to them," where 'others' clearly refers to Gentiles.

The fulfilment of that part had to wait until much later. But we can see it beginning to be fulfilled in today's gospel reading.

Given all I have said so far, you may be having some doubts about what we heard in our Gospel reading.

At first hearing, Jesus' behaviour doesn't seem to fit well with what we have been reading in Isaiah about justice and equality.

First, let's put the reading into context. Jesus has just been teaching his disciples about what is clean and unclean in relation to the Law of Moses, concluding that what makes a person unclean is what comes from the heart:

"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony and slander. These are what make a person unclean, but eating with unwashed hands does not make them unclean." (15. 19)

Following, this Jesus and his disciples have moved into Gentile territory, the area around Tyre and Sidon, probably to get away from the crowds, so that Jesus could have some peace and quiet in which to teach his disciples and prepare them for his final journey to Jerusalem, and also to get away from the religious authorities taking an unhealthy interest in him.

But even in Gentile territory, Jesus can't get away from those who need his help.

Moreover, the arrival of the Gentile woman immediately poses problems in relation to what Jesus has been teaching his disciples about what is and what is not unclean.

First, because she is a Gentile, she is regarded as unclean and someone with whom Jews wouldn't mix. It's interesting that Matthew in our gospel refers to her as a Canaanite, whereas in Mark's version she is referred to as a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia.

'Canaanite' emphasises that she comes from the ancestral enemies of the Jews, those whom the Jews had displaced when they entered their "Promised Land." Given that enmity, it's remarkable that she is prepared to approach Jesus, but love for her daughter and her desperation for her to be cured overcome any prejudice that she might have held.

And from Jesus point of view, there is a second problem. She is a woman and rabbinic teaching was that it was wrong for a man to talk to a woman in public or to dispute with her.

And finally, Jesus was clear that his calling was to what he refers to as "the lost sheep of Israel."

He knew his time was limited – the authorities were after him and he knew that he would have to challenge them in a way that would lead to his death.

Before that happened he had to fully establish his message with the Israelites. There wasn't time for him to be diverted into a mission to the Gentiles.

For all these reasons, the appearance of the woman presented an unwelcome intrusion. But it also presented the opportunity to ram home to his disciples the lesson he had been giving them on what was and what was not unclean.

The immediate reaction of the disciples to the woman's appearance is to ignore her distress and get Jesus to send her away.

When Jesus comments that he has been sent to the lost tribes of Israel only – it's unclear whether this reply is made to the disciples, aimed at the woman, or is Jesus reflecting to himself – the woman takes the opportunity to approach Jesus and renew her plea for help.

In understanding the next stage of the interaction, it would really help if we could see the expressions on the faces of Jesus and the woman. Given that the woman feels able to respond to Jesus' question, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs," by picking up the image and using it

herself, rather than walking away in disgust... given that she responds in kind, it seems likely that Jesus' comment is delivered with a smile. Certainly, Jesus takes some of the sting out of his remark by using a word for "dogs" that refers to household pets, rather than stray dogs on the streets. So it may be that Jesus is teasing her. Certainly he is delighted with her reply and impressed with her faith. And so the woman gets her request granted.

And the disciples get a number of lessons: that people's needs should be met with compassion, and that being clean or unclean doesn't relate either to being a foreigner or a woman.

And how about us? What should we take away from these two readings?

First there's a lesson in equality. In the prophecies in Isaiah, the foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord will be treated in the same way as the Jews. They will be brought to God's holy mountain and given joy in his house of prayer.

This is given more concrete expression in Jesus' dealings with the Canaanite woman. She is given equal treatment to that which Jesus extends to his fellow Jews, such as Jairus, the synagogue ruler in Capernaum, whose daughter Jesus raises from death.

The demand for equality is something that lies at the heart of the Black Lives Matter movement: equality in relations with the police; equality in employment; equality in education, for example. But more than that, and this relates to the Me Too movement I referred to at the beginning, Jesus treats a woman as his equal.

Then there's the question of justice. How would we react if we heard that a doctor refused to treat a seriously ill patient because they were a foreigner. We'd be outraged, I think.

Yet that was the initial reaction of Jesus' disciples when approached by the Canaanite woman. So Jesus had to teach them lesson in justice.

So let's bring that lesson a little closer to home. And if this sounds political, I'm sorry, but yes it is political. And if you read the gospels carefully, you'll see that Jesus, himself, was not afraid to be political.

This week we have heard that our government's response to those people so desperate to get away from persecution or conflict or deprivation in their home lands that they are prepared to risk their lives in crossing one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world in frail inflatables... our Government's response is to request the Royal Navy to get involved in turning them back, yet the numbers involved are minuscule when presented as a fraction of our population: 0.006%, and lower than the normal number entering the UK to claim asylum in non-Covid times

Where's the equality, the justice or, indeed, the compassion in that?

The disciples' reaction to the Canaanite woman's request for help was to turn her away. Jesus taught them that there was a better way.

And that's a key lesson for us to learn both as individuals and as a nation.  
Amen

### **Prayer Pointers:**

We pray for those who are seeking justice from bullying, abuse, cruelty and oppression. For those who are denied basic human rights because of unjust regimes. May we not be afraid to seek justice on their behalf. May we stand with the weak and be the voice of those whose voice has been suppressed or silenced.

Continue to pray for Governments around the world who are having to make hard decisions day by day to combat the spread of Covid19. May their deliberations be guided by science. Pray for communities in our own country affected by further lockdowns and for all in local councils and health authorities who work tirelessly to reduce the number of cases of the virus.

As the number of unemployed increases almost daily, we pray for all those who have found themselves out of work. We hold before our Father those with families to support and those who may face eviction from their homes. We pray for all who work to help them to face the future and find new jobs.

For our two congregations of St Mary and St Francis. May we learn to worship and serve together as one body of Christ here in West Wickham. We pray for those who will form the Vision Group, that they may seek the guidance of the

Holy Spirit in all their deliberations as we look for new ways to connect with our community.

For all those in our congregations who are unwell at this time either at home or in hospital especially those whom we know and love. We pray for their families who support and care for them. We pray for those who are facing bereavement that they may find comfort and peace in the love of God our Father.

**Closing Prayer:**

God of our pilgrimage,  
you have willed that the gate of mercy should stand open for those who trust in you: look upon us with your favour that we who follow the path of your will may never wander from the way of life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen