

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020**  
**10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity**

**Collect**

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.

**Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32**

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

**Matthew 15:21-28**

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

## Sermon

One of the advantages that has come with lockdown and its aftermath is the way that BBC iPlayer filled up with a range of television box sets. I have been enjoying watching the very first series of *Call the Midwife*, which first hit our screens a number of years ago. As those of you who have watched the programme will know, the first three series are based on the memoirs of Jenny Worth (born Jenny Lee), who worked as a midwife with the Sisters of St. John the Divine, an Anglican community of nuns, in some of the poorest parts of London in the 1950s.

Re-watching the first series, I was reminded of the levels of poverty that she encountered. What struck me especially was seeing her first visits to insanitary housing, and the struggle she had to keep the disgust from showing on her face.

It is a reminder of how we can sometimes struggle to match our responses to our principles. Presumably the young Jenny wanted to work in those areas that she felt needed her most. Perhaps it was her ideals that took her to the poverty and deprivation of the East End, hoping that she could make a difference. And yet, confronted with conditions she had never seen before, it took time for her responses to catch up with her ideals.

And it was a range of factors that helped in the transition. She became used to the conditions that she was encountering on a daily basis, and that took away some of the shock factor. And in conversations with both the religious sisters and nursing colleagues who had been there longer, she came to see things differently. And meeting those she was nursing helped, too. Once she could see beyond the poverty, it became possible to relate to the individuals, each of whom had a story to tell.

I wonder if you have had an experience where your principles and ideals have been challenged by reality. Where you have wanted to help, but haven't really been prepared for what you have found. And I wonder, too, what it is that has helped you to make the transition. To gain a deeper understanding by allowing your ideals to be shaped by the reality that you have discovered.

In this morning's gospel reading we encounter Jesus in learning mode. In discovery mode. In many ways it isn't a comfortable reading, because it doesn't really fit our expectations of how Jesus will respond.

Jesus enters Tyre and Sidon, traditionally gentile cities, and encounters a Canaanite woman – a Gentile. The woman approaches him, and we get an impression of the commotion she may have been causing because of the disciples' response. Of course it was not unusual for Jesus to be surrounded by people asking for him to heal them or their loved ones. But there are subtle differences. Signs of the significance of this particular story. Of the reasons why this particular event is recorded in our scriptures.

What I especially love about this story is the interplay between the characters. This encounter stands out because it isn't the same as what has gone before it. Rules are broken, so familiar responses aren't possible. Instead, each character has to improvise, and in so doing discovers something important.

From the outset the Canaanite woman identifies Jesus as Lord, Son of David. Just think about the significance of this. She is recognising that he is a rightful king. All the more surprising given that the

disciples themselves have been remarkably slow in their recognition of Jesus. Remember last week when they saw him walking towards them on the water and weren't sure whether it was Jesus or a ghost? It isn't until the next chapter of Matthew's gospel that Peter will declare Jesus to be Messiah. This woman has got there first. She is a woman of extraordinary insight.

Jesus doesn't answer her, so the disciples step in, suggesting that she should be sent away. Jesus clearly doesn't agree, because he engages with the woman, explaining that he sees his mission as only towards the lost sheep of the house of Israel. At this stage, it seems, Jesus believes that there is plenty of need in Israel to occupy him.

And yet the woman will not be deterred. We often hear about the importance of persistence in prayer, and this woman is nothing if not persistent. Her daughter, after all, is unwell. She is determined to do all she can. She kneels before Jesus, recognising his kingship, and asks once again for help.

It is the next response of Jesus that is particularly puzzling. In re-stating that his mission is to the house of Israel, he refers to the gentiles as dogs. And yet, far from being deterred or insulted, the woman simply picks up his metaphor, and claims the right to at least the crumbs from the table. And Jesus, recognising her faith, does as she wishes, and her daughter is healed.

It is impossible to know exactly what happened for Jesus in this exchange. Whether he was convinced his mission was only to the house of Israel, or whether he was still trying to work it out. Whatever Jesus's own understanding, it appears that the Canaanite woman helped him to see things more clearly. While he wondered if he could fulfil the needs of both Jew and gentile, she seemed convinced that he could. Perhaps she saw in Jesus what he was only beginning to see in himself. Her encouragement – her recognition that even the crumbs that he had to offer were like gold dust – was instrumental. As was her faith.

There is plenty about this story that challenges us, but there is also so much to encourage and inspire us. It is a reminder that we are all works in progress. That each one of us is called by God. And that it is our life's work to grow into that calling. Just as Jesus grew into his calling. And that we do so by being prepared to listen carefully to those we encounter. By knowing what we believe. By having principles and ideals, yet knowing that their outworking may not be exactly what we first thought. And it is a reminder to us that Jesus will always listen. That we live in relationship with him. And that the ongoing conversation we engage in will help us to live out our calling.

Amen