

Ephphatha!
a sermon preached on the
fifteenth sunday after Pentecost
6 September 2015
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Isaiah 35:4-7; Psalm 146; James 2:1-17; Mark 24-37

Let me start by clearing up a widespread misunderstanding. The gospel is *not* primarily concerned with the spectacle of healing events and miracles. Just a few weeks ago we heard John the Evangelist's Jesus on this: "You are looking for me not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves".¹ The gospel's concern does not lie with surface detail: but with something very deep, what our tradition calls salvation.

The Syrophenician woman's daughter has an 'unclean spirit', from which Jesus cleanses the girl. Along with all the other healing miracles in the gospels, what makes these events 'gospel', good news, is that this is about the extent, the bounds, of salvation. Who 'qualifies' for salvation? This is the gospel's abiding preoccupation. The standard religious assumption is that only certain persons, 'the elect', are 'in' – everyone else is 'out'.

It's extraordinary timing that the lectionary gives us this particular gospel story today – at precisely the moment when the deluge of refugees from Syria is being pressed into our global faces. The courageous woman in today's gospel interrogates the shameful treatment of asylum seekers by our nation – this 'lucky country' which justifies 'preventing deaths at sea' by giving sinister consent to deaths anywhere else except on our doorstep. The woman, and her daughter, are 'outside' salvation because she is Syrian – not one of the elect, unclean. Salvation is only for 'the elect'!

In fact Jesus agrees with that assumption, refusing her request on solid and universally assumed biblical grounds: "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs".² In this striking, shocking, memorable one-liner Jesus' own cultural prejudice is devastatingly exposed.

Even more extraordinary, then, in today's gospel is the fact that the challenge to this cultural prejudice comes not from Jesus the 'Son of God'³ - but from the rank outsider! It is the woman – triply unclean, as Syrian, as woman, and as mother of an unclean daughter - who blows apart Jesus' inherited prejudice. "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs".⁴ For me, this is one of the most moving, and revealing, of all gospel encounters. Even though, as we read just last week, Jesus challenges the creepy religious police on the matter of purity, nevertheless he still had only 'the chosen', the children of Israel in mind as worthy of salvation. Today's encounter exposes him.

It's also worth noting that in the gospel there is absolutely no mention of 'faith': Christians are wont to claim that Jesus granted her request because of her faith. Un-biblical nonsense! Rather, it's the woman's *argument* – literally, her word⁵ – which persuades Jesus to accept that he was wrong. She tackles his narrow assumption with her robust debate.

This amazing encounter drives home two crucial points: it is the outsider – the unclean, the despised and rejected – whose insistent demand initiates the breaking open of the narrow and prejudiced limits to salvation; and, the mark of Jesus' true greatness is his willingness to concede that his narrowly-envisaged salvation is wrong. I am reminded of the wonderful title of James Alison's book: *The Joy of Being Wrong*.⁶ For Jesus, the spiritual transformation into

¹ John 6:26

² Mark 7:27

³ Mark 1:1

⁴ Mark 7:28

⁵ Mark 7:29 *Δια τούτου τον λόγον* *Dia touton ton logon* 'Because of this word'

⁶ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, New York: Crossroad, 1998.

which he was initiated in his baptism, and which continued in forty days of desert testing, is here taking him to yet another depth. It is, of course, another stage on the path of spiritual transformation which takes its most complete expression in crucifixion-resurrection.

In other words, this gospel encounter is like every other gospel episode. It's yet another way of expressing the spiritual transformation – from one degree of glory to another⁷ which is the Paschal Mystery.

In the very next episode we see the next stage of Jesus' spiritual transformation. Jesus journeys deep into 'gentile' territory,⁸ risking his own life in the service of the truly evangelical salvation which the Syrophenician woman has introduced to him. When Jesus sighs – fingers in the deaf man's ears, touching the man's tongue with his own spit – declaring **Εφφαθα** *Ephphatha*, "Be opened",⁹ it's not only the deaf and dumb man who is becoming opened.

So it's the bold and courageous outsider woman from Syria who has effectively declared to Jesus: Be opened! And Jesus consents to spiritual transformation, accepts her healing of him, becoming himself opened to the breadth of salvation,

We have seen this very dynamic played out again and again ever since. Ignoring its master, the church has repeatedly drawn tight boundaries around itself, declaring its 'faithful' to be saved, all others 'lost'. This is summed up most succinctly in the official teaching '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*', 'outside the Church there is no salvation'. But in spite of the church, category after category of the despised – those deemed to be outside the church's narrowly-defined salvation – have eventually come to claim their rightful place at God's banquet table: slaves, blacks, women, divorcees, gay and lesbian people, to name only some of the most obvious.

And, thanks be to God, in every age there have been Christlike figures within the church who have recognised the timeless voice of the Syrophenician woman. And, accepting the joy of being wrong, have thus become opened to the astonishing and gratuitous good news of God's salvation. And the whole Body of Christ is incrementally transformed, from one degree of glory to another – a spiritual undertaking which continues until God brings all things to completion.

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⁷ 2 Corinthians 2:18. GK: **μεταμορφουμεθα** *metamorphoumetha* cf Mk 9:2
⁸ Mark 7:31
⁹ Mark 7:33-34.