

16<sup>th</sup> August 2020, Tenth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 15)  
Sermon preached by Revd Adam Dickens at Derby Cathedral

During the month of May just passed, the University of Derby launched something called a 'People of Faith and Belief' month, an initiative with which I was involved, along with my Muslim colleague, and University staff members from different departments. I was particularly pleased about it, because universities, as a whole, have rather mixed feelings about the presence of faith on campus, so this represented a real step forward.

Overall, it went well, with thoughtful contributions from a range of perspectives, offered each day; and the University's on-line bulletins and social media channels ensured that all staff and students had access to them.

We're hoping that this will be an annual occurrence, and sit alongside other more established monthly celebrations, such as those that mark Black History and the LGBT+ community.

Together they form part of a policy aimed at creating a sense of inclusion, so that students and staff, whatever their backgrounds, feel that they can bring their whole selves into the life of the University community.

Now inevitably, it's not without its difficulties, perhaps most chiefly being, 'which groups get included and which don't, and who decides?', but all the same, the aspiration is a good one.

I begin with that example because today's readings are wrestling with similar questions. In both cases, the resident and established Jewish community is trying to work out how to respond to those groups, living in its midst, who come with a different cultural package to their own.

The Old Testament passage from Isaiah comes in the context of the book's final ten chapters which reveal a deeply split Jerusalem community.

In today's extract, the focus is on a debate in which some are arguing that the non-Jews, or 'foreigners', present in the city, could not belong to the chosen people or participate fully in its temple worship. This is, in spite of the fact, as we read, that these 'others' 'were wanting to join themselves to the Lord'.

By way of response, the writer challenges the exclusivist position of the established Jewish population. He calls for an approach in which the temple should be seen as a house of prayer for all peoples, whatever their race or culture, and not for one particular group.

Our Gospel, too, touches on a similar debate. In it, we learn that Jesus has moved into the area of Tyre and Sidon; it's a remote region and the furthest north that he is said to have gone, the implication being that he has headed to this distant place to get away from the crowds to have some reflective time with his disciples.

Certainly, it was an area well beyond the horizons of the Jews, and so it is perhaps no surprise that a Gentile woman, in distress at her daughter's poor mental state, should have sought him out. Although a non-Jew, she clearly knows how to address a Jewish teacher respectfully, calling him 'Son of David', and asks Jesus to heal her daughter.

What then follows, though, may come as something of a surprise to us. Jesus says that his mission is only to the House of Israel. It is not to the gentile community, to whom he refers as 'the dogs'. However, he quickly discovers that he is dealing with a determined woman, who takes issue with him.

She challenges Jesus, asking, 'why should the Jews have exclusive access to your ministry?'. And as the episode concludes, we find that Jesus changes tack and healing is given to her daughter.

On a number of levels, it's a staggering exchange, and one which raises various questions; for instance, would Jesus really have been so offensive to this woman, and why was he so set on keeping his mission to the Jews only?

And also, why is it, when we are so used to Jesus' being the master of those who question him, do we find, in this instance, that the boot is on the other foot, with this woman seemingly shaming him into an act of healing?

In making sense of it, scholars have suggested that what we get here is an echo of the struggles of the early church and its debate about the admission of Gentiles into its Jewish-dominated community. For, from the outset, there were those within the community who very much opposed preaching to the Gentiles, or to that matter, to having any contact with them at all, and the passage may well be picking up something of this attitude.

And, moreover, Jesus' seeming change of mind in relation to the Canaanite woman may well pick up on the time when the Gentiles were finally admitted to the church. Whatever we make of these interpretations, though, the final note of today's Gospel is clear. We are being invited by the writer to join Jesus, and cross to a place where all are included, both Jew and Gentile.

Certainly, it is a powerful message for those who heard it at the time and within that culture, and tragically, in that same land today, it continues to have an especial poignancy about it for the Palestinian community, which finds itself treated as an underclass by the policies of the Israeli Government, and is often, in effect, having to scramble under the table to see what crumbs are left for it.

But this Gospel message, that there is a valued place for everyone, has implications within our own times and our own situation, too.

The Black Lives Matter movement, which is very much in our awareness at this moment, has given expression to the on-going experience of those groups who are treated as second class citizens simply because of the colour of their skin.

And, in addition, as the western world struggles to come to terms with the impact of mass migration, it has implications for our response to the plight of refugees and asylum seekers, or for that matter, to any of the groups that stand outside whatever are considered the cultural norms.

The very inclusion of the story of the Canaanite woman within Jesus' ministry calls into question any sort of mentality that seeks to exclude others because they are different and don't seem to fit. It challenges any attitude that allows prejudice to play a part, & where decisions are made on a basis of fear and ignorance.

The vision of God's kingdom which is presented to us here in our readings is one which seeks to make space for everyone. That isn't always easy or comfortable for us; it can leave us facing some tough questions about ourselves. But if we are willing to allow Christ's redeeming love to work in our lives, we can begin to develop our responses towards those who are different from us, moving away from an 'us and them' mentality, however unconscious that might be. For with God, all are included, all are equally valuable. God's love reaches across the divides we create, bringing healing & hope.

So, at this time, may our prayers and lives be ones that reveal a courage to build up the sort of communities in which all who want to belong can find a place. Amen