

Others

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28

Waiting for the bus, I often find myself seeing and hearing what is going on in the primary school playground. I know a lot of the children through my school chaplaincy there and it's always lovely to say hello to them – through the safety of the railings! They are busy with their own things: running around letting off steam, forming new friendships, exploring the possibilities, and the boundaries, around relationships. The loud noisy children, the sociable and gregarious children, the quiet, solitary child, the children that want to run and jump, the children that walk, sometimes arm in arm, in twos.

Perhaps you remember your own school days –the fierce loyalties and pitiless mercilessness, the alliances and the ostracizations. Perhaps the name-calling, and the attacks on whatever seemed different from the norm. Someone wearing glasses. Someone with a limp. Someone too fat, or too thin. Someone whose clothes were different. Someone from a different part of town; or a different school; or a different country. Someone who was, 'them', and not 'us'.

Both our Bible readings this morning raise the question about how we, as people of faith, deal with 'others'. People who we think, believe, or feel don't 'belong'. People not like us. People who have degrees from Cambridge, or live to the west of Corstorphine, or even on the wrong side of Comiston Road! How often have we judged, consciously or subconsciously, those who are 'other'? On the grounds of their accents, or way of dressing, or physical attributes, or gender, or sexuality, or ethnic origins, or age, or political or theological viewpoints. Oh, we recoil at the very idea of such judgement, or we rush to the barricades of self-justification that we have erected over the years. But if not for all, then I suspect for many this is something we may need to acknowledge.

We rightly say at several points in our order of service, "All are welcome". We sang it 15 times in our opening hymn. But do we mean it, and live it? I remember pondering over the front page the church website and what to write about the kind of Church we are and struck on the sentence: "*Morningside Parish Church aims to be a welcoming and inclusive congregation.*" Sometimes we aspire, but I suspect that sometimes we don't always hit the mark. Being honest about it, and then determining to do something about it, consistently, persistently, is God's way for all of us.

It's not much comfort but our reading from Matthew's Gospel reveals that on one occasion, Jesus seems to miss the mark. Even given the ancient and bitter rivalries between Jews and Canaanites, calling this woman a dog, especially when she is asking for help for her sick little girl. She's an annoyance, Jesus ignores her, and the disciples plead with Him to make her go away. Life is often interrupted by people and situations that make inconvenient demands on one's time and get in the way of one's plans. When such interruptions threaten, some people know how to duck the call, take another route home, wait an extra ten minutes, or refer the problem to someone else. If we avoid the unpleasant interruptions in life, are we missing something important that God has for us? ⁱ

She's not one of the 'family', she is not a Jew. She doesn't belong. She is 'other'. But still she kneels at His feet; she pleads with Him; she does not take 'no' for an answer. And her persistent faith awakens something in Jesus and a shift takes place in how He sees what His mission is. Not just to save the children of Israel, but to save the children of the world. Not just to include the children of Israel, but to include the children of the world.

It's not a comfortable story – a Jesus still learning. A Jesus not pitch-perfect in every action. Some try to explain it away, but the jarring reality is we see Jesus wrong-footed, and shifting His opinion. And when I think about it, a Jesus open to changing His mind and expanding His engagement

with the world is, in truth, a wonderful thing. It's not about Jesus getting things wrong. It is about Jesus doing something about it and changing the salvation history of the world. He came to save not just the children of Israel, but the people of the world.

It is almost as if we see an echo of what Isaiah had talked about centuries before when he was trying to understand the mind of God after the tough time in exile for the chosen people. They remained chosen, but God added to their number. Not just the people inside the fold of faith, but those *others*, outside, who were to be welcomed in. In particular:

"...the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be His servants, every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyfully in my house of prayer....the Lord God...gather the outcasts of Israel, I will gather yet others...besides those already gathered."

Right there, in the grim, blood and thunder, smiting and judging pages of the Old Testament, the promise of God, to welcome and save all people. All those others. And us.

The Canaanite woman, who knew Jesus as the Lord, the Son of David, to whom Jesus said with astonishment and I think delight, "O woman, great is your faith!"

The God of the Bible loves the others, includes the others, heals the others, saves the others when they find their way in faith to God. If they practice, if they live out lives with love and justice, God will gather them in. Foreigners, outcasts, Israelites, Canaanites, and you, and me. They have a place in God's heart, these other children of God, and they should have a place in our hearts too.

Not that we shouldn't work these hard things out, and what it will mean in reality for us; not even that anything goes. God makes it clear that love and justice are the guidelines, along with worship, that matter.

This God-breathed reality changes everything.

Not only in the worship side of life, but in the faith-lived-out- loud sides of life too.

Does this word from God, realised and applied by Jesus, say something to the way the Government of our country over the years, of different political colours, has treated those who came over on the Windrush boat, engaged with our society and served it, and found themselves threatened by deportation? Does it say something to the veterans of the Gurkha regiment, who had fought for our country, and faced being denied the right to stay in the UK? And does it say something about the iniquitous and inhumane 'Stop the Boats' mantra, (which should really be stop the human traffickers) and the desire to deport refugees to Rwanda, or place them on a floating prison (a Victorian hulk policy, which has also been used intermittently for UK prisoners up until recent times) now shamefully reincarnated in the Bibby Stockholm barge, and only halted when Legionella bacteria was found in the on-board water system.

Does this, I wonder, chime in with God's word through Isaiah to gather and welcome in the 'others', or Jesus' recognition that 'others' like the Canaanitess had a seat not *under* God's table but *at* God's table of mercy. A transformed realisation given powerful articulation later in Matthew's Gospel:

"...I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

God's radical hospitality isn't something buried in the pages of the Bible. It is expected to be put into practice by people of faith today, and to be a standard, a difficult, challenging, awkward standard, by which we may measure the behaviour of Governments and Churches, businesses and educational establishments, Festivals and sports teams, ourselves, and others.

Might it also be another reminder of what Jesus teaches that faith isn't only about loving God, with heart, soul and mind, but also to, "love your neighbour as yourself." God is saying that what defines a faithful person, a child of God, is not their gender, or lifestyle choices, or nationality, or even their religion. The faithful person is the one who loves the name of the Lord, keeps the Sabbath, embraces justice, and walks in righteousness. God's immeasurable generosity, God's open-handed invitation, for us, and for all those others.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Lewis F Galloway, Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol2, p31