

Pentecost 15 6 SEPTEMBER 2015

FIRST READING Isaiah 35.4–7a - see appendix for readings

A reading from the letter of James.

GOSPEL Mark 7.24–37

WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE AND WHAT ON EARTH ARE WE DOING HERE?

As you might expect, I was hoping to use this sermon to include some thoughts for the Big Conversation that follows later. But these ideas have been overtaken, to some extent, by the events of this week - the predominant news about the refugee crisis. But maybe, in that light we should still ask: who do we think we are, and what on earth are we doing here?

None of us can have escaped the news this week. The migrant situation in Syria is extreme. If you have seen recent photographs of city streets-bombed out, buildings flattened to rubble, streets covered in masonry. Across the whole country, as a result of an oppressive regime, using unimaginable weapons on its own people, as a result of incursion by ISIS from the south with beheadings and rape in their wake; as a result of western bombing. Some try to remain. Many flee. And people fleeing that place literally have nothing left to lose but their lives, and many of them, as we have seen, have lost even that.

I have a friend who has written about his reaction. He begins:
"One Sun journalist three months ago said that rather than use rescue boats for refugees we should use gun ships to stop them. "show me the bodies floating in the water, and I still won't care" she said. She got her wish."¹

None of this - this reaction to foreign threat- is very new. Something else I read about last week was about the spy panic that went on in the run up to the Second World War. Xenophobia was everywhere. : 'one amateur spy catcher reported seeing a man with a 'typically Prussian neck', Robert Baden-Powell (yes, the first Scout master) insisted that you could spot a German spy from the way he walked. Spies were said to be poisoning chocolate, recruiting mental patients out of asylums, coming disguised as nuns or butchers boys. ...

¹ Pip Blackledge sermon today.

What can we do about the current situation? I think it calls for leaders in the EU to find a joint solution (seems there is one on the table that Cameron won't sign up to), that all of the west- US included need to stop selling arms to all comers; and we need now to face the pressing question about what to do with these foreign refugees. Nigel Farrage has apparently suggested shipping them all to 'an island off the shores of Europe' Isn't Britain an island off

And in all of this, there is a question of **identity**. They are different from us, brown skinned, different language, many Muslims, and we don't know what to do with them. and that is not a trivial thing.

The Gospel today, seems apt. Jesus is being asked exactly the same sort of question about identity.

It seems that Jesus wasn't free of prejudice –

In the gospel he is accosted by a gentile woman, a culturally unacceptable thing for her to do on two counts – she is a Gentile and a woman, a woman from Syria!. But Jesus uses words that shock us, 'It is not fair', he says, 'to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. The woman pushes her luck by responding, 'But little dogs eat the scraps from the children.' She comes back at Jesus with grit, grace, even humour. She has attitude.

like the many from Syria who look for the crumbs.

It may sound shocking to say that this woman, in her insistent need reminded the Son of God of the scope of the Father's love. We see her reaching across prejudice, across lines of insider and outsider. Foreigner. She is certain that God does not have favourites. In this Gentile woman's faith, Jesus sees that the people of God have been enlarged. He changes his mind.

Over and over again the gospels show us Jesus interacting with those whom most societies consider marginal. Today it might be a woman who is also a gentile and a deaf man who cannot communicate. The stories suggest, for the rest of us, that there is something about being an insider, comfortable in the world you live in, that actually makes it harder to hear God. If the world is basically treating you benignly, then you tend to forget that its standards may not be God's. It was Maurice Baring who said: 'If you want to know what the Lord God thinks of money, you only have to look at those to whom he gives it.

Here is what else my friend, Pip, said:

"What was it about the woman's reply that changed Jesus' mind? What stopped him regarding her as a lesser human being, and begun in him the

process that allowed him to see himself, not simply as the saviour of the Jewish people but of the world? Because let's be clear about this, this is the point at which Christianity becomes a religion for the world, and not just a version of Judaism, ...

What was it about her that made him change his mind. Was it her words, her manner, her eyes, her desperation?

He was so fixed on his identity, his Jewish Messiah identity, and then something swept that aside. And it was compassion."

He does so well to point this out. It is about compassion. in the face of which, questions about the 'other' are swept aside. When we see those who are suffering and we say All those other things don't matter. All our objections (Britain is full, too costly, too difficult, too much change, too foreign...) When we see the images of that wee boy being picked from the sea... You matter. You matter to me, and you matter to God, and I need to help you".

If we are asking who we are, then I hope that is one of our answers- people of compassion. For us prejudice is out. It is in the letter of James: 'Don't show favouritism.'

There is a lot of work to do to overcome our fears, to begin to listen to others, to see 'them' with different eyes. We worry about Britain being overrun by Muslims- so what? What does it matter if these are Muslims in need, Muslims afraid and in flight? What better way to demonstrate our Christianity?

it will not be easy if we manage to find homes and hope and employment for battle scarred people who are very different from ourselves; but the imperative for Christians is to go further ... to see the ... enriching encounter with others as [something] central to the gospel.'

In our conversations today- let's ask who we are? What is the community of St Cuthbert's? is it open, welcoming, compassionate, liberal in giving as well as in thinking....

Rowan Williams said, 'When we look at one another we see not only a face that is being looked at by God, we see a person from whom God cannot bear to be parted; so how can we bear it? Any division in our world, class, race, church loyalty have to be confronted with the painful truth that apparently we find it easier than God does to manage without certain bits of the human creation.'²

² Rowan Williams, Ponder these things: 72

Appendix: today's readings and psalm.

Year B

Proper 23

Pentecost 15 6 SEPTEMBER 2015

FIRST READING

Isaiah 35.4–7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water.

PSALM Psalm 146

**R R You open wide your hand, O Lord,
and satisfy our needs.**

1 Alleluia!

Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing
praises to my God while I have my being. R R

2 Put not your trust in rulers, nor in any child of earth, for there is no help in them.

3 When they breathe their last, they return to earth, and in that day their thoughts
perish. R R

4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! whose hope is in the
Lord their God;

5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; who keeps his
promise for ever;

6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger. R
R

7 The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord
lifts up those who are bowed down;

8 The Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the
orphan and widow,

but frustrates the way of the wicked. R R
9 The Lord shall reign for ever, your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.
Alleluia! R R

A reading from the letter of James.

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor.

Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

GOSPEL

Mark 7.24–37

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'

But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis.

They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha,' that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.

Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'