

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 20 Year A 2017

It is interesting note how resilient some stereotypes can be. We know how the church itself is the object of plenty of stereotypes! Despite the loud protests, all sincerely devout people aren't bigoted dinosaurs, all priests aren't paedophiles, not all people of faith are hateful and oppressive. Perhaps one of the most enduring stereotypes is that the God of the Old Testament is a war-like, violent, blood-lusting deity. It is the kind of stereotype that has people dismiss faith as irrelevant or dangerous. But there are plenty within the fold who hold to his idea as well. But for those who take scripture seriously will find that the stereotype just doesn't bear up. Yes, it does take some sophistication and nuanced reading to navigate our way through some of the problematic areas, and there are some. But not as many as might be imagined.

Instead, a careful reading of the Old Testament will reveal a God who calls to life, who remains interested, included, present; who enters the human sphere time and time again to draw human kind into relationship with him. God, as revealed in the Old Testament, is the God of covenant, of steadfast promise. And while God remains ever faithful, ever merciful and ever patient, it is the people whom he has called into relationship with him who mess it up time and time again, who neglect God, offend God, and forget God. While God establishes a particular relationship with the people of Israel - and the Old Testament is really just the unfolding of that story - the later and more mature reflection of the prophets reveals that this relationship is *not* exclusive or elitist. Israel is called into covenant with Yahweh to be a sign *to the nations*; to reveal to *all* humankind its ultimate destiny.

And so we hear from Isaiah today, *Foreigners*, (so, not just Israel!!) *who attach themselves to the Lord to serve him and love him...will be brought to God's holy mountain....Their sacrifices will be accepted...for my house will be a house for all the peoples*. This is Old Testament religion perhaps at its very best: inclusive, open, optimistic, shattering the stereotypes. Israel, by its true and right worship of the one and true God, fulfils its vocation by welcoming surrounding nations into its worship. If anything confounds the myth of the violent God of the Old Testament, then these prophetic writings surely do. The creators of the church's lectionary have made great efforts to likewise counter this myth. Mostly, then, our first readings - from the Old Testament - seek to illuminate the Gospel in some way. The Old Testament portions we hear week in and week out in a very real and direct way seek to point to, inform and echo our readings from the Gospel. The point here is *continuity*. A truly authentic and robust Christian faith must insist that there is not one God for the Old Testament and another for the New. No. Not only does Christ fulfil the broad scope of Old Testament faith. But also, the Father of Jesus Christ is the same Father of Israel.

So, the vision of inclusivity and openness placed before us today by Isaiah, then, is echoed in today's Gospel. It is perhaps, the reason why the figure of Jesus Christ remains attractive. Despite all the charges laid against the *church*, it is hard for critics to direct anything against its *founder*. Because he does encapsulate the values of compassion and tolerance and love and goodness and inclusiveness. Or does he? ...

That is great challenge of the gospel portion we encounter today, and how we come smack against some of the stereotypes we might have of Jesus. Because in many ways (in a strange irony), it is jolly hard to discern whether Jesus here actually is the compassionate, welcoming, loving one! What we have placed before us today seems to contradict or confound the usual images we have of Jesus. It is a tricky text to sit with, in the same way perhaps we might agonise over those tricky bits of the Old Testament. We know elsewhere from the gospels how Jesus draws into his inner circle women. They are among his friends and supporters and disciples. Yet the woman here Jesus initially ignores. While we are used to Jesus offering us a model of inclusivity – sinners and tax collectors and all that – of welcoming the outsider, here Jesus gives a curt reply to the Canaanite woman (also an outsider): *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. Even with her begging on her knees, she is coldly rebuffed, with the startling comment that the children’s food shouldn’t be given to the dogs.

But rather than dismiss this as an unhelpful eccentricity in the gospel account, or as a record of Jesus just having a bad day, we need, as for all things, to see this portion in its wider setting. Immediately prior to the account we hear today, Jesus has challenged the Pharisees over the barrier between what is clean and unclean. So today we hear Jesus *enact* this boundary-crossing. He does this physically, geographically, by crossing the barrier – the border - into the gentile region. He steps into ‘unclean’ territory for want of a better word. And it is a particular feature of Matthew’s Gospel that it is those *outside* of Israel recognise Jesus for who he is. So, Matthew wants to show that the gentiles, those outside Israel, can recognise and receive the good news. And this is the case here. The woman recognises Jesus as Messiah, *Lord, Son of David*. We might also say, though, that Jesus himself is converted by this woman; that he is challenged out of his own stereotypes; that she reminds him of his authentic mission, as the prophets reminded Israel of theirs.

There are surely plenty of stereotypes which we must continue to do battle with, which may limit our own understanding of God and of others. And stereotypes which prevent the full proclamation of the gospel. Sometimes, as people of faith, we have move beyond what is dished out to us, and sometimes even what we dish out to ourselves. The scriptures offer us a great model in this. Sometimes we have to work hard at sitting with the difficulties and ambiguities of our faith and of our scriptures. But engaging with this process this will lead to a stronger, more robust faith.

So often we are told we are not inclusive or open or tolerant. Its an easy caricature. And a popular one. I would suggest to you that the church is, at its best, the most inclusive the most tolerant, the most open body of people that has ever inhabited this earth. There is no group of people, no single organisation that holds within itself a wider cross section of humanity than does the church. In this we fulfil Israel’s ancient vocation. And we fulfil too Christ’s commission to cross all barriers and bring the good news to all nations, even if Jesus himself had to be nudged along in that direction by an insistent and vocal gentile! May God give us all the strength and the courage to go beyond the myths and into the fullness of truth. Amen.