

## **Sermon for Sunday 8 September 2024**

### **Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity**

#### **Boundaries and Barriers**

I know I don't need to tell you that we live on a lot of boundaries here in Woburn Sands. The Parish of St Michael's spans two police forces, two local authorities, two Parish Councils, two MPs, two dustbin collections.....Last week I had two items to post to the Registrar. I felt I had to explain to our Church Treasurer why I hadn't put them in the same envelope and saved a stamp. Of course, one was for Milton Keynes and the other for Central Bedfordshire! Most of the time all these boundaries cause us mild inconvenience and make an amusing story to tell. Boundaries don't have to be barriers – but sometimes they are, as we here in our readings today.

In our Gospel reading Jesus is travelling through some of the Gentile regions to the north of the Holy Land. Tyre is now on the coast of Lebanon, and has been in the news recently because there were some Israeli strikes near the city a few days

ago. Jesus then travels by a somewhat circuitous route back towards the sea of Galilee and through another Gentile region, the Decapolis (or ten towns). Here he meets the man who suffers from deafness and a speech impediment. It's not entirely clear why he had gone to this region. It was perhaps to get some time away and respite from the constant pressure of the crowds. We're told he entered a house and did not want anyone to know that he was there.

He may even have wanted to take some time to think and recover after the particularly strong disagreement with the Pharisees and the scribes about the Jewish purity laws. (Last week's Gospel reading) recorded the first part of Mark Chapter 7. Jesus had accused the Pharisees and scribes of being outwardly religious in their careful practices around ritual purity, but far from honouring God in their hearts. What defiles, he says is what comes out of people, not what goes in. (Mark 7: 1 – 23). They have erected boundaries and barriers for people to observe, but have not understood the true nature of holiness. They also do not believe in Him. It's

also not long since Jesus was rejected in His home town of Nazareth. “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.” (John 1: 11) as John’s Gospel puts it.

It's against this background that Jesus meets the Syrophenician woman. She seeks him out, desperate for a cure for her daughter. To do this she has crossed several boundaries. Besides being a woman (women did not normally approach or speak to men who they did not know) – she is ethnically and religiously different from him. Jesus’ reply to her is shocking, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (v27). It is deeply disturbing to us, with our Christian understanding of the equality of all human beings, to hear Jesus saying this. But we have to remember that – at this moment – we haven’t yet reached this point in God’s plan for salvation.

To call someone a dog was an insult, because dogs were unclean animals. Yet Jews did routinely refer to Gentiles as ‘dogs’. Jesus’s words reflect the sense that there is a huge barrier

separating Jews from the rest of the world. The Jews are, after all, God’s chosen people, and it is to them that Jesus has been sent. He is, whether recognised or not, their Messiah.

However, Jesus’ words, “let the children be fed first” do not rule out the possibility that the dogs will get their turn. It’s not that the Jews are so much ‘better’ than the rest of humanity, but they are simply ‘earlier’ in the working out of God’s plan. Jesus’ priority is to preach to His own people.

But in the end the woman’s humble, but witty and clever reply moves his compassion, and he heals her daughter. Her faith, breaking through the barrier between them, has opened a way for His power to reach her. She becomes a pioneer and a paradigm for all Gentile believers who experience the presence and power of the risen Lord in their lives. God’s love breaks through all boundaries and barriers.

Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman perhaps prepared him for his meeting soon after with the deaf man with the speech

impediment. He is also a Gentile, and has been brought to Jesus through the faith of his friends. Jesus wants the healing kept quiet, but he cannot prevent the news of His power spreading in the Gentile world. There is an openness and acceptance here which he does not always find amongst his own people. This must have given him pause for thought.

So, what do these stories have to say to us?

We are fortunate to live in a time when the Christian message. The message of God's love to all of humanity - supremely shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus - has spread to all corners of the world. We read in the letter to the Galatians, "There is now no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" because all of us are one in Christ Jesus. As I said earlier, this is why we find Jesus' words to the Syrophenician woman so very shocking.

Here's one thing we can learn -

If we have the slightest tendency to think of ourselves as the 'in' people in St Michael's Church and others as outsiders, we need to think again. If we have the slightest tendency to think that we are 'good' because we obey certain rules and attend church regularly, we need to remember the Pharisees, who were very devout, but missed the heart of God's message. God shows no favouritism, as our reading from James reminded us. In fact, Jesus often made a bee line for the poor, the despised, the outcasts, the unclean and disreputable. Jesus responds to humility, faith and need wherever he finds it – even when it is in unexpected places. Even when he has to deal with people who are very different from him. And so should we.

God breaks through all boundaries and barriers with his love.

Amen

*Revd Diana Young*