

Sermon Proper 15 August 17th 2014

preached by Revd Caroline Sackley at La Chapelle Achard

There are frequent challenges working both in the Church of England which is very broad in its doctrine and practices and working with so many Christians of such varied backgrounds and denominations. There is a need to tread lightly with other people's beliefs as we are all on different journeys and at different stages. We are reminded to cast out the plank from our own eye before we take out the splinter from another's.

The Gospel reading from today has something of that sense. This story is in the context of an increasingly angry and critical set of encounters between the Scribes and the Pharisees and Jesus. Jesus challenges their understanding of the law and therefore of God.

Jesus argues forcefully and with confidence against well educated, powerful people. Jew against Jew, interpretation against interpretation.

Then a stranger enters the argument. She challenges all that the Jews stand for, salvation is not going to be just a Jewish affair. She is not trying to take from the children of God, she wants what is left over, and last week we saw just how much was left over, twelve baskets full. Jesus praise her faith, it was a courageous act to ask in front of so many Jews for healing, a woman and a Canaanite.

The Gospel reading shows again our God of surprises, the God of the unexpected, he overturned the taboos that the Jews had against their neighbours, and in most places at that time women were kept in their place.

Paul realises that God, in whom he places his trust, doesn't always behave as it is thought he should. He has concern over his fellow Jews but also knows clearly that his ministry is to the Gentiles. Our God is the God of the Jews and the Gentiles, it is something that the present day church needs reminding of again and again as well.

The kingdom of God is for everyone. There is a joke that a congregation moan and complain about the noise and energy of babies, toddlers and young people during a service, but then keep asking why the young families don't come to their church anymore.

Unfortunately it's true. What it appeared they wanted was either a separate service or very well behaved, quiet, perfect children, that nobody knew were there. It often happens that as a church we are not very good at welcoming the different, just as the Jews didn't welcome the Canaanite woman or the injured man on the side of the road.

For Jesus, the disciples and the early Christians following their faith was costly, even to death and they would have all known the stories of what was happening. For many people, and I include myself in this, the most costly price of faith that we pay is leaving the house on a Sunday morning and the price of petrol for our car.

Paul was struggling to sort out years of training about the Jewish nation being God's chosen people and how that God is greater than he realised. He had his Damascus moment, he knew he had been chosen to follow Jesus, to serve God in an uncomfortable ministry, despite an unpromising start. Whatever has happened in our lives, we too have been chosen. God wants us, and what he wants of us is probably more than we could ever have expected or imagined, because God's plans are greater than we can imagine.

Have we got the courage, the faith and the persistence of that Canaanite woman? She discovered that even the crumbs could satisfy her faith and heal her daughter. Are we also ready to ask God for miracles? Or are we like members of the crowd, staying in the background, whilst being rather envious of her? I preached two weeks ago about Jacob wrestling with God and how wrestling was a common theme in those readings. Then this weekend after I had written this I came across an article by the Evangelist, David Hathaway, who also talks about wrestling in prayer and the story of Jacob. He thinks that we give in too easily with our prayers, we almost don't demand enough of our great God. Remember the woman from today's reading, remember the Roman Centurion, they wanted miracles, and they weren't afraid to ask, and there are many stories in the Bible of not giving up, of being persistent. Let us try, collectively and individually, to pray more, to be with God more, to ask for the seemingly impossible. As David Hathaway says, if you do the possible people will say well done! If you do the impossible they will see how great God is.

The church today needs miracles. God needs people who are brave enough to ask, who are persistent in prayer, who think that nothing is too big for him.