

Sunday Homily

10TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

16 AUGUST 2020

YEAR A

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith!
Let it be done for you as you wish.’”

Matthew 15:28

Illustration

This story of a Canaanite woman’s encounter with Jesus is not a comfortable one to hear, nor an easy one to understand. It seems out of character for Jesus to reject a distressed woman seeking healing for her child. It is unlike him to use such dismissive words to anyone, humiliating someone in the presence of others.

It might help us in our understanding of it to set this story in context and look at the events which lead up to it.

At the beginning of chapter 15, Matthew tells us that Pharisees and scribes come from Jerusalem to question Jesus. We can be sure these questions are not asked with minds open to a new understanding and deepening of faith. They are challenges thrown at Jesus in order to discredit and condemn him. They ask why Jesus’ disciples don’t follow the traditional Jewish rituals of hand-washing.

Jesus doesn’t answer their question. Instead he launches a ferocious attack on the way they themselves use traditions to undermine the spirit of God’s law. He calls them hypocrites – people who give the appearance of worshipping and honouring God but who in fact put their own interests first, harming others in the process.

These Pharisees, then, accuse Jesus of breaking tradition while Jesus insists that in fact he is the one calling people to live according to God’s laws, not human distortions of it.

Gospel Teaching

After this encounter with his critics Jesus talks to his followers about what makes someone clean or unclean. He explains the teaching in more detail to his disciples who (not for the first or last time) haven’t understood him. Jesus says that food we eat is processed and passes out of the body. It’s a physical function having no moral implications.

However, the way we speak and act does have moral implications affecting ourselves and other people. Our words and deeds can be said to be unclean but they come from our hearts, not from our bodies and diets or the way we eat.

It is after this teaching that Jesus goes to the district of Tyre and Sidon where the Canaanite woman comes to him to beg him to heal her sick daughter.

At first Jesus ignores her. Perhaps he is struggling within himself about how to respond. His compassion and love for all suffering people would move him to respond with healing. But he is also aware of his calling as God's Chosen One from and for God's chosen people.

As he struggles, the woman continues her cries for help and the disciples suggest that the best way to silence her would be to grant her request. Perhaps partly still talking to himself and perhaps in a questioning way Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Now the woman comes right up to him, kneels in front of him and again asks for help.

Jesus knows that his critics would reject this woman and would consider Jesus unclean for having spoken to her. He voices their thoughts, saying, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Her quick, witty retort that even the dogs eat what the children don't want releases the tension and we can perhaps imagine Jesus' smile and delight in finding such faith in an "outsider" when it had been missing among the "chosen people". His love and compassion flow freely once more and the daughter is healed.

Jesus demonstrates vividly that while he might be ritually unclean (by speaking to a Gentile woman) his words and actions are loving and healing, reflecting God's gracious acceptance of all people.

Application

This whole chapter presents us with challenges about how we live out our faith in our homes, congregations, communities and places of work.

We're powerfully reminded that we can say and do all the right things but it's what's going on in our hearts that matters and what is going on in our hearts will always somehow be shown in our lives and relationships. We're reminded that God looks to the very centre of our being but does so with love and compassion, always wanting to forgive and heal so that we can live lives free from guilt and able to love others as we have been loved.

Finally, we are reminded that we, too, are called to love beyond all boundaries, ignoring social niceties and prejudices because no one is ever outside the reach of God's love – which is for all people everywhere and always.