

## Trinity 10

I have asked the PCC to consider St Michael's becoming registered with an organisation called Inclusive Church. This involves signing up to a statement of belief which says that:

"We believe in inclusive Church - church which does not discriminate, on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We believe in Church which welcomes and serves all people in the name of Jesus Christ; which is scripturally faithful; which seeks to proclaim the Gospel afresh for each generation; and which, in the power of the Holy Spirit, allows all people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus Christ."

I am sure that you recognise St Michael's in that statement of belief, but I am asking that our church signs up and publicly joins the Inclusive Church organisation because I think it is becoming increasingly important that we stand up and be counted among those who will not allow people to be marginalised and discriminated against, and who want to be a positive force for good. We have seen yet again this week the violent results of extremism and hatred, and it is necessary that we all actually are public about the love that guides us as Christians, love for our neighbour, whoever they may be, and the love of our God who has created and sustains us. You'll also realise that my sermon today is very pertinent to this, and it will be posted in full on our website. I shall be including information about the website of Inclusive church in next week's bulletin where you will be able to find out more about the organisation. If you have any questions or concerns about us joining Inclusive Church, please speak either to myself, or to any member of the PCC that you feel comfortable discussing this with.

## Matthew 15: 10-28

Well, what a reading! If it was anyone but Jesus saying these things to the Caananite woman I wonder what our response would be? We'd probably be complaining at the racism and sexism shown at first glance in this reading. But these are Jesus' words, and so we have to look at them much more deeply and make the effort to understand what is really going on here.

The context of this reading is set at the start, as Jesus is teaching the disciples new rules about how things are considered clean and unclean, what is alright, permissible if you like, and what is not. Jewish life was hedged around with laws, which had been reinterpreted *ad infinitum* by the rabbis, it was a bit like believing that you could get to heaven if you didn't walk on the lines in the pavement. But at least you knew what the rules are, and people, in general tend to like that. The religious leaders had been teaching the people what they could eat that was clean, and what they should steer clear of because it was viewed as unclean. But Jesus, as is so often the case, turns these human rules on their head. He is getting to the heart of what God wants, not a petty keeping of rules, but an attitude of mind and heart that is 'clean' rather than 'unclean'. It isn't about what you eat, but what you **say**, because what you say comes from your heart, and these are the things that defile you, that make you less than you can be, rather than what you eat, or whether or not you wash your hands.

And then, we come to the woman who wants Jesus to heal her daughter. In Matthew's gospel we are told she is a 'Caananite', a Gentile, not of the chosen race, those 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' to whom Jesus has been sent. An outsider in a very real way. But the term Caananite was a very old one, not commonly used in Jesus's day. So by calling her this, Matthew is taking us back to the story of the Hebrews entering the Promised Land when the Caananites were all but exterminated by Joshua. How would it feel to be one of those remnant peoples? You'd certainly be aware of the historic hatred of the Jewish people around you, of the prejudice against you. It gives us some idea of the woman's desperation that she is prepared to beg for help from someone she sees

as one of her oppressors. But her actions show her extreme need in other ways as well. She is approaching a man who is not related to her, this of itself is forbidden by the Jews, so she is stepping outside convention. And she names Jesus as Lord, as Son of David. She clearly knows who he is, that he is Jewish, and what he represents, she knows the offence that she is causing. And the disciples ask Jesus, in fact they **tell** Jesus to send her away. But he doesn't. However, his words are hardly encouraging. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He almost seems at this point to be encouraging her to say more. But his response to her plea for help is then very negative: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Different commentators give different slants to this comment, it's certainly a difficult one to square with our understanding of Jesus. Some look on the use of the term 'dog' as being in an environment where dogs were pets, some claim that the word is more like the expletive 'bitch' and it then becomes more difficult to 'talk away' this incident. And there are several possible understandings of what has happened in this encounter.

The first suggestion is just a very human one, that Jesus is having a very bad day. He's been dealing with lots of sick people already and in the midst of that he's had the Pharisees taking offence. He's already been getting pretty harsh with them, and now he runs out of patience and snaps at the woman, but then recovers his composure, commends her faith and grants her request. The trouble with this theory is that, having just said that what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, it doesn't say much for the state of Jesus' heart. What comes out of his mouth are not words of tiredness and frustration, but words of insult, demeaning.

A second possibility (which is something of a favourite) is that perhaps what Jesus said isn't as bad as it sounds. Perhaps in another culture and with a different tone of voice and a sparkle in his eye, we'd understand that Jesus was not being offensive at all.

A third possibility is that perhaps Jesus is a product of his environment, just as we inevitably are products of our own upbringing (and I think we sometimes forget that Jesus is completely human). I want to tell you

how this is explained by a New Testament teacher called Edwin Broadhead. He grew up in the Deep South of the USA and was about 17 years old before he realised that there was any other way of thinking about black people than the racist way of the culture he grew up in. His view of this story is that perhaps Jesus was in a similar position. Every Israelite, and probably especially Jesus (who as a child even argues in the temple with the teachers), grew up thinking of themselves as members of the chosen race and everyone else as gentiles who weren't part of God's plan. We know that Jesus was fully human, and the gospels tell us that he grew in wisdom and in favour with God as he grew up, so it seems reasonable to think that Jesus could have taken for granted the prejudices of his own upbringing until he was faced with the need to question them, with a woman who was desperate for his help.

Perhaps this is the moment when Jesus became aware of gentiles, and even of gentile women, as being equally loved by God and equally deserving of the mercy of God. The difference with Jesus is that the moment his eyes are opened his heart is changed and he acts differently. It certainly **seems** as though Jesus has a change of heart during this encounter, and then begins to act differently. This change of heart is otherwise known as metanoia, or repentance. Is it possible that in this story we see Jesus repenting? Which might seem to raise problems for our usual doctrine of the sinless perfection of Jesus.

But there are two different ways of thinking about human perfection and sinlessness. There is a static view that comes out of Greek philosophy and sees sinless perfection as the peak of human moral possibility. You have to grow into it and so you're not perfect until you get there, and then you are, which is probably how we tend to think of Jesus. Alternatively, there is a growth view that sits better with the Hebrew spirituality, this sees sinless perfection more as a steady growth towards godliness, a growth that at each new possibility grows in the right direction, makes the right choice.

Think back for a moment to Edwin Broadhead. He argues that until he became aware that there were other ways of thinking about black people, his racial prejudice could not be described as a 'sin' in the sense of it being something for which he could be held responsible. A child cannot choose whether or not to be influenced by the only environment

they know. But Broadhead also sees that, from the moment he became aware that there were other ways of thinking, he could see the possibility of making a different choice and was therefore responsible for his attitudes in that area. Once he could choose between a racist response to a person and a different response, any choice for the racist option would have been a sin. So the sinlessness of Jesus doesn't mean that he wasn't influenced by the racist assumptions of his culture. Instead it meant that as soon as he became aware of the alternative he was able to consistently move into greater godliness.

If this is actually the Biblical understanding of Jesus as sinless it has huge consequences for us as well. Because we need to understand that actually morality isn't hard-wired into us, and there is the possibility for us to change, as society itself changes, and as we ourselves become more aware of our own prejudices. This isn't a sliding into sin, or not being biblical, it's really taking on board and understanding that Jesus has told us that it is what is in our heart that can defile us, and choosing to live, not by the letter of human interpretations of Jesus' teaching, but by the 2 great commandments that Jesus himself has taught us: to love God with all our heart and mind and soul, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Once Jesus begins teaching there aren't any comfortable 10 easy rules to follow any longer. In this passage from Matthew's gospel it's exciting that Jesus is actually giving us a genuine example for us to follow. It can be difficult and painful to begin to understand that perhaps something we've believed all our lives may be not only wrong, but sinful, and to be confronted with a new challenge to change and grow, but there is huge encouragement in the fact that if we get it right, or at least partly right, then we are genuinely following in the footsteps of Jesus. It gives us all the responsibility of thinking through our attitudes to those around us, and measuring what we think and say and do against those great commands, to love God and our neighbour as ourselves.