**Matthew 15: 21-28 Canaanite woman, tribalism**

Online 16 August 2020

Father, may we hear your word to us and may we be shaped by it. For your name’s sake. Amen.

I’m sure that many of you will know that when vicars and doctors go on holiday, they always try to keep their job a secret when talking to other people. No doubt others do the same, maybe social workers, for instance. The reason is clear: while on holiday, trying to get away from it all, they don’t want people to be quizzing them or bringing all their problems to them.

In April last year, I went on a sort of retreat to Skye, called Pilgrimage of Life. It wasn’t advertised as specifically Christian, and I went because I had come across and read some books by the man who was leading the week. I knew he was deeply spiritual and thoughtful and would be inspiring.

I was in need of rest and refreshment. We were a group of 20, ranging in age from early 20s to a little bit older than me (not by much!). The first evening was a session where we all introduced ourselves and said a bit about why we had come and what we hoped to gain from the week. By the end of the session, with my pastoral antennae twitching, I had identified 5 or 6 needy souls. My instinct was to engage with them and try to help. But I had to tell myself: ‘Hang on, this is not what you’re supposed to be here for!’ I did later have some really good conversations with 2or 3 of these folk. But I had been quite taken aback by both my perception of the need in them, and the recognition of my own need to take a step back.

I think that was how Jesus felt: we know that by this time, things have been ‘hotting up’ around him: the Jewish authorities are onto him, they are following him around, they are clearly out to get him; John the Baptist has just been beheaded; and everywhere in Judea the crowds are besieging Jesus, wanting something from him, wanting his words, wanting his healing for their sick ones. And we are told that Jesus has left his homeland and ventured into the area of Tyre and Sidon, into foreign territory. This is Jesus trying to get away from it all. He hasn’t just gone to a deserted area – he knows from experience that the crowds will follow him there; he has actually gone into the land of the ancient enemies of his people. He is in what the Jews regarded as hostile territory.

And then this woman appears and shouts out to him, “Hey, Lord, Son of David! Have mercy on me”. “My daughter needs help!” And we are told that Jesus ignores her. Now why is that? What on earth is going on here? Jesus, ignoring a cry for help – that doesn’t sound like the Jesus we know, does it? He goes on his way. The woman won’t give up, but keeps on yelling. The disciples are embarrassed, annoyed: ‘Can’t you do something about this woman? Make her leave us alone!’ We can sense the awkwardness of the situation.

Jesus is certainly surprised. Is he shocked? Is he even afraid this might be some sort of trick? Why is this woman calling him Lord, recognising him as the Son of David when even his own people don’t do that yet? Just what is going on? Even when he finally stops and speaks, we can hear the question in his voice: “I was sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel, wasn’t I?” “Or was I?” Suddenly Jesus is in unknown territory. We sense that for a moment he is unsure of himself.

But the woman comes forward in clear and genuine need and humility, begging his help. And Jesus tells her that she doesn’t belong to the right group, that she is not his concern. But the woman sees beyond all notions of groups and claims Jesus’ attention as a fellow human being.

This story is very timely for us. As human beings, we all have a deep-rooted need to belong somewhere, to belong to a group that we can identify with, give our loyalty to and be supported by. We might feel we belong just to our family, or to a church, or to a political party, or a football fan club, to a gang – these are basically our tribes, and we all seek comfort in belonging to our tribe.

That is part of our being human and there’s nothing wrong with it in itself. Where we run into problems is when we start to feel that our group, or our tribe, is superior to the other lot; when we feel rivalry, or threat. When we start to tell ourselves that because a person belongs to a particular group or tribe, they must automatically think or believe certain things – that we might disagree with. This is dangerous, and I suspect we are all guilty of it.

For example, I have never felt I could join a political party. I might be in sympathy with the socialist philosophy of the Labour Party, but might strongly disagree with some of the individual policies they suggest. I might think some Tory policies could be helpful, but find myself disagreeing with many others. I have never wanted to wear the label, because I realised that I would then be expected to endorse a package of ideas as a whole, which I simply could not do.

When we moved up here, I met my farming neighbour and it was clear that he had certain expectations about me, not that favourable! To begin with I was a southerner, he a Yorkshireman; I had grown up in suburbia, a townie, he way up in the Yorkshire Dales; I had been to university, had even been a teacher, while he had left school at 14; I went to church, while he didn’t have much time for religion. In terms of groups or tribes that we belonged to, we were miles apart. It was some years before the prejudices that the labels carried with them gave way to the realisation that the labels didn’t say it all and that we could still become friends!

Many of you will remember the days when to be called a football fan meant you were a hooligan – despite the fact that the great majority of fans went to matches, often as families – as Sharon described the other week - just to enjoy the game, the camaraderie, the fun of it all and they were as shocked and horrified as anyone by the violence that often went with matches.

We see it everywhere: I have recently been watching Downton Abbey again, where we see the prejudices and divisions caused by class labels writ large. And it’s nothing new, of course. Remember even the disciple Nathanael, when invited by his brother Philip to meet Jesus of Nazareth, sneeringly replies: “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” I hear in this echoes of the old saying that the only good thing to come out of Lancashire is the road to Yorkshire. We are all stamped by our labels and they are not bad in themselves, only when we use them to judge others by.

And of course, the big one is the race label, where we are inclined to lump people together in one group and believe that ‘they’ all think and believe and behave the same way. This has been particularly clear in our own situation recently, with the lockdown restrictions being reimposed on us. I have heard several people say “I don’t want to be racist, but it’s because of the Muslims”, as though they could make a generalisation about Muslims as one group. I’m sure these same people would be very quick to distance themselves from the idea that all white people, or even all English people, behave the same way – for good or bad! Sweeping generalisations like that simply are not true. Have all white people been behaving the same way during lockdown?

We are so fond of our labels and we allow ourselves all sorts of prejudices because of them. We lump people together in ways that are totally unjustified. Some people look at Christians and think we are all like the TV evangelists who peddle the prosperity gospel, or the fundamentalists who take every word in the Bible literally and still believe the world is only 6,000 years old. Is that true of me? No! I would still carry the label Christian, but the label doesn’t say it all.

And so it is with our Gospel today. Jesus was a Jew. The woman was a Canaanite. Ne’er the twain shall meet, you would have thought. Even Jesus appears to have been unsure. But in her passionate persistence, in her love for her daughter, in her humility, in her witty repartee Jesus sees beyond the labels they both wear, he sees and he meets the real human being, he recognises her faith, her need and he and she are brought together. And as they overcome these manmade barriers, what results is healing and wholeness and joy. There’s a good lesson in there for us. Amen.