

Sermon 16.8.20

Who is in and who is out?

Isaiah 56 v 1,6-8 Matthew 15 v (10-20) 21- 28

Two people. One steps out, falters, fails and is told by Jesus he has little faith. One breaks through convention shouts in public and Jesus tells her she has great faith. Peter and the Canaanite woman. The leader of the church. The person outside the chosen people. One has the faith one does not.

You could call this the parable of the persistent woman. History knows her well. She will advocate for her child whatever it takes. She keeps going though society tells her to be quiet. Tells her she is not being lady like to shout and does not invite her into the room where the important people are- except to clear up the refreshments. Although currently she is furloughed and soon will be unemployed. Unlike those round the table making the decisions.

A foreigner comes to Jesus and asks for him to heal her daughter. He is silent. The disciples want rid of her. Too much noise. Too much irritation. She comes up shouting. We would shout too if we thought this was our only hope for our child. She comes and kneels before him. The most humbling and gut wrenching of things. She asks for his help. He grants it.

Jesus challenges the woman with the use of the term ‘dogs.’ She gives as good as she gets. She concludes the proverbial statement by saying the children get fed first but the house dogs then get their share. Jesus is amazed. The editor of the gospel tells us that the healing has happened.

In the early chapters of Isaiah – up to 55 we have the words of the prophets to people in exile. Now in chapter 56 Isaiah is speaking to the people who are trying to rebuild the nation on their return from exile.

The challenge to the returning exiles in their desperate situation is to continue doing what is right. Alongside that they are reminded of God

who is beyond their national borders or boundaries. The easy thing to do in a time of crisis is to focus on me and mine. It is right to give time to self-care in this sort of season. Eating right. Avoiding the weed, legal or not. The alcohol. The screens. Exercising. Sleeping. All of these are important. But they are not the end. They are the start. So that you can look outwards. To think of our family and reach out to our friends. That all matters. But even that is not the end of it. Nor is that the model for how God loves. God is of essence love. God's people are to do what God calls them to do because of what God is doing. Both "justice" and righteousness ("what is right") have to do with relationships. The people are to respond to God's gracious acts by developing and maintaining a sound relationship with God. Developing and maintaining sound relationships with other people goes hand-in-hand with a sound relationship with God. How are we doing that at the moment? Not- how do we do it usually but now? Maybe we need to do something differently

For the people returning from exile they were focussed on rebuilding the nation. One of the questions is -who is in and who is out? God through Isaiah says that the rules have changed. The flow of the arc of history is towards the inclusion of people who once were seen as being outside. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the welcome that those usually outside will be receive. Jesus picks this up and develops it. Jesus declares that people demonstrate whether they are clean or unclean not be what they eat but by what they say and how they treat other people. Jesus offers help to the outsider and a woman to boot. Isaiah says that those who keep the Sabbath, bringing their offering to God's holy mountain are acceptable whatever used to be said about them. The hint at unlikely inclusion has always been there for Jesus. For Jesus the interesting thing is that there are 3 Canaanite women in his family tree, Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth. The anonymous woman of today's story has the possibility that her foremothers are Jesus' kinfolk. Question one what are women doing in a genealogy? And two what are Canaanites doing in the history of the one born to be King of the Jews? Surely this shouts- it is something beyond race.

The woman's faith is in Jesus in his ability to make something happen. Is that our faith too? Do we wring our hands with helplessness and hopelessness or live as God's hopeful people? We do not understand- stop pretending – we never understood. We have enough to know that we live in the Spirit of the one who knows. Can we live as people who do not know the answers but have a faith that God will be with us in the middle of this storm?

And just before anyone thinks....I would love to be a bold person for the cause of right but I'm wee and I'm at home and I cannot even help in the building at the moment. Or I am so busy. Let me offer a challenge. There are plenty of people who need our input. Let us reflect on how we are behaving towards others. There are Christians around the world who need support in their places and times of persecution. Amnesty would be glad of our letters. There are people who are lonely and need phone calls and there is prayer to be done and money to be given and spent well. There are people who are overwhelmed with anxiety. They need our listening and gentleness.

It is Carla Grosch Miller in her work on trauma who has commented that although the return from exile was a time of tragedy and trauma for the exiles it did give birth to an inclusive monotheism which was foundational to the ministry and life of Jesus. The question is would we have got the jewel without the pressure? The question is what jewel is awaiting us? The question is do we have the faith and courage to believe that? For ourselves? For society? For the church? For KURC?