

August 16th 2020 for 10th Sunday after Trinity -

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Gospel Reading Matthew 15:21-28

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever thought about mirrors? They are quite odd things really! Because it is only through mirrors of some kind that we can actually see ourselves! Without them I'd have no idea what my face looked like as all I can see if I try without is the tip of my nose and the shadow of my beard.

We live at a time and in a culture which is incredibly vain, where for many much importance is placed on physical appearance, and so I think it might be safe to claim that never before have people spent so much time looking at themselves in mirrors or in photos, and yet even with that being the case none of us spend as much time seeing ourselves as we do not seeing ourselves! Even the vainest person will in their life not see themselves more than they will see themselves (if that makes sense!). And what is interesting is that although some people might spend a lot of time in front of the mirror now, compared to our friends and family we see ourselves for a fraction of the time! It is those around us who see us the clearest and longest. What we see as a reflection in a mirror they see in reality!

Now the other thing with mirrors is that even when we do look at ourselves in them, we only see what we choose to put in front of it. We can choose what area of us we want to see in the mirror and the area we don't. We have control over our own reflection! In fact, we might go further and say that as mirrors are simply reflections of ourselves then our lives are full of them. Social media is perhaps a good example of it. A mirror we hold up to the world that gives a reflection of our choosing to the world.

So, the point I want us to pick up here is that if we hold the mirror, if we have control of it then actually we see only what we want to see, what we choose to see. Whether this standing in front of the bathroom mirror, whether this is social media, whether this is how we talk about ourselves with our friends and family. In all these scenarios we control the reflection of ourselves that we allow others to see. But, when that mirror is placed in the hands of someone else then we are sometimes forced to see a side of ourselves that we never really encounter. It's like being at the hairdressers or barbers, something I, as you will see if you meet me, haven't done for a while now! But at the end of your haircut they hold the mirror at the back of your head so you can see what it looks like! For many of us that might be the only times in life we ever really see the back of our head. But because someone else is holding the mirror we can see what they see quite easily, something we normally wouldn't see.

And the story we have in our Gospel reading is I think an example of this! It is an example of being shown who we are, beyond the parts we choose to see. It is being shown the part of us that when we are holding the mirror we choose not to dwell on or perhaps are not even able to see. So, let's look at this in more detail.

At the outset we should say that on first read this can seem like a very strange story. Jesus this person of immense compassion and love comes across as rude, inconsiderate and also racist! It can be alarming to read. What is going on here? This doesn't sound like Jesus? And that is important to

recognise because we are meant to think that! And as we unpack this story hopefully, we will see something quite beautiful is going on here!

First, let us acknowledge who is part of this story. We have Jesus, we have a Canaanite woman, and very importantly we also have the disciples!! This is not a story of just Jesus and this woman, but this is a story of Jesus, this woman and the disciples. Next, we need to comment on an important piece of information we have about the woman – Matthew tells us she is a Canaanite woman. If you have read the Old Testament you will have come across many accounts of the Canaanites and it is safe to say that the Israelites and Canaanites do not have a friendly history to each other. So, this woman is not a Jew she is a Gentile and not only that but from a country whom Jews have held a hostile view towards.

We also cannot ignore the fact that this is a woman and at this time and in that culture, it was not deemed appropriate for woman to talk to strange men. This is something we pick up in other stories about Jesus too, that people are often uncomfortable about how he speaks with people he should not be speaking to, the woman at the well is a good example of this, something I'm sure we will look at in our new series in our Wednesday services where Tony and I will be journeying through the Gospel of John. So, this woman is breaking cultural and gender barriers here! She is a very brave woman! She is taking a big risk in doing what she is doing. Why?

Well for one she is desperate! Her daughter is suffering badly, and she describes that she is tormented by a demon. So as a Mother she is seeing her daughter struggling and it is something she cannot cope with. And so, she comes to Jesus, a Jewish teacher to help. She must have heard about Jesus' compassion and ministry among all people, men and woman and felt that he can do something. She even addresses him as Lord, Son of David, an honourable Jewish title, with links to being the Messiah! She recognises who Jesus is and she cries out for him to have mercy on her. This woman has been brave and fearless, she has recognised Jesus as someone compassionate, who can help and someone incredibly special.

But Jesus ignores her! He doesn't respond to her at all! And note the disciples' response. They do not say Jesus how can you not help this woman? They do not say Jesus where is your compassion for this woman in desperate need? No, they say, Jesus don't just ignore this woman, tell her to leave us alone, get rid of her! She keeps shouting and annoying us. Send her away! There is no compassion in the disciples! They do not care about this woman.

So, Jesus responds, that he was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus responds in the way the disciples would have not only expected but wanted. Jesus says I'm a Jew and I am here only to help the Jews. But this woman does not give up! She is not only brave she is persistent. She is not intimidated by the disciples and their comments for Jesus to get rid of her. Instead she focuses again on Jesus!

Lord, help me! She says.

Will the disciples find compassion now?? No, there is not response from them. Their only words in this have been to ask Jesus to send this pleading woman away. So, Jesus responds again as the disciples would want him to, he brings forth a theological argument for why he cannot act. He reaffirms his work is for the Jews and in doing so even compares Gentiles like this woman to dogs!

You would hope at this point the disciples would have had some stirring of compassion for this woman. You would also hope that they are beginning to see that this does not sound like Jesus

normally does? He is acting in a way which seems odd given the stories we have been reading so far in Matthew. Regardless, it would seem Jesus trusts this woman implicitly and therefore gives her the opportunity to deliver an important lesson to the disciples. He knows she will not be deterred. This is a woman of immense bravery and faith who has come before Jesus!

And so she responds with a very clever answer. A response full of humility, a response which surely must have touched the hearts of the disciples who saw themselves above this woman. Her response is also exactly what Jesus expected. The response of someone who deeply understands Jesus, despite what words he may have been using, what mirror he was holding up to her. She had faith that Jesus was the compassionate and loving person she had heard about and trusted and believed in him.

You can almost feel the joy now in Jesus' words, when he says woman great is your faith, this woman had shown and taught the disciples an important lesson. Jesus expresses how great her faith is, he honours her in front of all the disciples! He breaks the cultural and gender barriers. He shows compassion! And has held a mirror up to the disciples too, so they can see themselves in a way they had not before.

It is important to remember that Jesus was a teacher, he was constantly trying to get people to think, testing their thoughts and actions so that they can learn from them. And here is a great example of this.

The student who comes out with flying colours is the Canaanite woman. Even though for the disciples she is not from the right country, or the right gender. She is the top student. She displays bravery, humility, and intelligence in her interactions with Jesus. She is the one who shows great faith in who Jesus is. She is the one undeterred believing that Jesus is the loving person she has heard about. And she is the one whom Jesus honours at the end!

The disciples however, the ones who have been with Jesus all this time. Have seen all his acts of compassion and love. The ones who think of themselves as being from the right country and being the right gender are the ones who show how little they have learned about Jesus. How little they have understood him. In this story Jesus holds a mirror up to the disciples, a mirror which forces them to see a side they perhaps do not see often. A side they perhaps never even thought was an issue, but Jesus shows really is.

The disciples hold some deep prejudices because of their upbringing and experiences. Firstly because of the community they are from, in this case the Jews, they hold prejudice and racist views towards others outside of it. They are very comfortable for compassion to only be show to those within their community and not outside. SO much so that even a pleading woman, crying out for help is asked to be dismissed rather than helped.

Secondly, they would have held many prejudiced views towards women. The culture then was very much male dominated, and they would have looked down on woman. Jesus uses this whole experience to force the disciples to confront something of these feelings. He holds a mirror up to them and by his words he takes the disciples on a journey of where their views lead. And they lead to an uncomfortable place where a desperate mother's pleas for help are ignored. They lead to a place where compassion is now shown.

I think it is no surprise that this story ends so quickly. Although I am sure it did not in reality. We don't know how much more Jesus spoke to the woman or what they discussed but I think the whole

experience for the disciples would have given them much to think and reflect about. Jesus had shown them a mirror of themselves which revealed their deep seated prejudices and it would have been uncomfortable for them to see themselves in this way. It would have been uncomfortable for them to have been taught a lesson by the amazing faith of this woman.

But notice how Jesus does it? There is no direct condemnation of the disciples. He simply shows them a side of themselves that they perhaps had chosen to ignore or had never seen before. It is in the light of Jesus' compassion that their own prejudice is revealed. Jesus was always going to show compassion to this woman. And the compassion shown highlights the darkness of their prejudice even more.

There are other examples of this teaching from Jesus, perhaps most famous is the parable of the Good Samaritan, another story where prejudice is revealed in the light of compassion. But I think this lesson for the disciples would have been a powerful one because they would have seen the gentleness and love of a desperate mother and been confronted with the coldness and hardness of their own hearts!

I think this story is one we should reflect on deeply. Because just like the disciples each of us will have areas where we do not like to look. Each of us will have prejudices towards people, harbour negative views or hold back compassion for others. They may be things we are not aware of or perhaps things we know but are deep rooted in us. Whatever they are, we can ask God to show us them to bring them into the light of God's compassion and help us to become more loving.

The other thing that is lovely about this way of learning is that it comes and is done through love. Jesus knew the disciples well enough to know they were loving people, they had been with him love enough for his love and teaching to have started to rub off on them but he also saw that they had barriers which blocked that love. And so, an experience like this would have had a deep impact on them. Where they can see Jesus' love and where it leads and where their own love would have stopped.

And that is how we too can learn, we look to the amazing love of God and ask Jesus to use it as a mirror for us to help us see where our own love stops and ask God to help us remove those barriers. So, we can try to move past our own prejudices, our own shortcomings, our own weaknesses. To be better vessels of God's love in this world.

Amen