

Trinity 11

Sunday 16th August 2020



Readings:

Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, ‘Send everyone away from me.’ So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come closer to me.’ And they came closer. He said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.’ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 15:10-28

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, ‘Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.’ Then the disciples approached and said to him, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?’ He answered, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.’ But Peter said to him, ‘Explain this parable to us.’ Then he said, ‘Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.’

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

Reflection

This is a reading of two halves -

Part 1.

Last week we heard of a rather unorthodox crossing of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' destination on the other side was the region of Gennesaret where, we are told, he healed many people. While he was there, he has some unwelcome visitors as Scribes and Pharisees turn up from Jerusalem to give him the third degree. They have, presumably, heard rumours about this Galilean rabbi with miraculous power and want to check him out. But instead of praising him for his good works, they accuse him and the disciples of breaking the purity laws. Jesus in turn accuses them of giving lip service to laws but bending the rules when it suits their purpose and he calls them hypocrites. The first part of today's reading follows that conversation. Jesus calls the crowd to him and basically tells them not to follow the Pharisees' example. Their teaching may be sound, but their practice is very dubious. Purity laws have their point, but, Jesus says, it is not what goes in but what comes out of a person that may be unacceptable to God. We see throughout the Gospel that Jesus is compassionate and forgiving to sinners but reserves the worst of his ire for hypocrisy. That really gets up his nose, as here and he does not hold back. It is worth reminding ourselves that whatever image we present to those around us, Jesus looks on the heart and he knows what we are really up to. He will forgive us anything if we are truly repentant but a bogus remorse is not going to carry any weight with him.

Part 2

After this passage, we return to another miracle account. It says here that Jesus left that place and went to the district of Tyre and Sidon in the region of Syro-Phoenicia, an area with a strong Greek heritage, so away from his Jewish co-religionists and countrymen. We don't

know why he chose to go there at this point, but it is a seaside region; perhaps he was on his hols, feeling the need to get away from it all and go somewhere where he is unknown and can get a bit of privacy and R&R. But it was not to be. Even this far north, his reputation has preceded him and he has hardly unpacked his bucket and spade before a local woman comes calling, demanding his attention.

But her need is great. Her daughter is “tormented by a demon.” It is now generally agreed that demon possession was the only way the ancients could explain mental illness, although there are many even today who do accept it as a reality, even in ostensibly fairly advanced areas like the US Bible Belt. But the definition is almost irrelevant. What matters is that often people did have mental health issues of some kind, and their illness impacted on all those around them especially family and friends. And it was very scary. The transmission of physical disease was imperfectly understood but contagions were recognised and could be avoided by social-distancing – and how that term now resonates. But there was no protection against mental illness and it could strike anyone at any time.

We have come a long way, even though it is agreed that mental health has not always received the sympathy and attention it deserves. But we do know more now and the emphasis placed on the need to guard our mental as well as physical health during the enforced isolation of Covid lockdown illustrates. Research has shown that members of stable and supportive communities often have better physical and mental health than others. A church provides such a community so it is sad that we have all been deprived as we have in recent months.

The mother in our story knows none of this. To her it is a demon pure and simple. She has probably tried quacks and magicians in the past, but now this pagan Canaanite woman, in desperation, comes to ask a Jew for help, and that in itself must have been humiliating. Further humiliations follow; first Jesus ignores her, and his disciples try to send her away. When they fail, they ask him to step in and deal with her. Then Jesus makes this very wounding remark that he was sent to Israel and “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” I think that the medieval picture above beautifully illustrates the event and her initial rejection. Despite this cavalier – even racist - treatment, the woman persists - and she is a smart cookie. Her comeback, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,” is both clever and witty. Jesus is disarmed and finally grants her request. And in that moment, it does not matter what has caused the girl’s illness; all that matters to her mother is that she is healed.

I have not yet found an answer that totally satisfies me as to why Jesus treated her in such uncharacteristic fashion. Perhaps Jesus’ comment, harsh though it seems, may have been joking and not unkind and she heard the humour in his voice and responded in kind. Maybe he was testing her faith; maybe he was challenging the disciples’ prejudices; or maybe he genuinely thought that the time was not yet right for him to extend his ministry beyond Israel. Whatever the reason, the woman’s need and persistence, and her devotion to her daughter, overcome his reluctance and the miracle is performed.

Even if we still find the story a little puzzling, there are things that we can take from it. The way that the woman approaches Jesus shows patience and humility – but also a certain boldness. And we too can approach him boldly when we come with our requests, but we need to listen carefully to his reply. The disciples may have heard an insult, but what the woman heard was Jesus’ love. And, because of that love, her prayer is answered. The “crumb” that Jesus gives her is all she needs.

Amen

Prayers

Today's Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power
most chiefly in showing mercy and pity:
mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace,
that we, running the way of your commandments,
may receive your gracious promises,
and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen

Prayers for those afflicted at this time

We continue to pray, Lord, for all those suffering in this time of crisis,
Who are ill, or who have lost loved ones to Coronavirus.
But we pray too for those we know and love who suffer for other reasons;
Those of our family and friends who are ill at this time,
Those who care for them;
And those who are mourning.
We remember, too, those who have suffered in recent disasters,
Especially the people of Beirut
And those involved in the Stonehaven train derailment.
Be with all those who are injured or bereaved.
For your mercy's sake,
Amen.

Prayers on the 75th Anniversary of VJ Day

God our Father, in the dying and rising of your Son Jesus Christ,
you have brought life and salvation out of cruelty and death.
We mark Victory in Japan in gratitude for the courage of the Allied forces
who suffered for freedom in the Far East campaign
and in sorrow for all that hinders the coming of your kingdom of peace.
Give us wisdom to learn from the bitter memories of war, and hearts that long for the unity
of all nations.
We ask all this in the name of Jesus, in whom there is no east or west, no north or south,
but one fellowship of love across the whole earth.
Amen.

In Remembrance

Lord, we remember those who made the supreme sacrifice, in defence of their country,
those wounded and maimed in battle and those who continue to be affected by war,
mentally or physically. Today we remember those who gave their lives in World War II and
especially in the Far East. And as we remember, so we pray for peace and justice all over the
world that we may never again witness such a terrible conflict.

Amen

Prayer for Hiroshima

*commemorating the dropping of the first atomic bomb on the 6 August, 1945
(Feast of the Transfiguration)*

God, you are the Father of all the families of the earth,
and call the nations to live in peace and unity.

We remember with sorrow the devastating destruction and death
unleashed on this day upon the city of Hiroshima, and later upon the city of Nagasaki.
We pray for the people of Japan, and all whose lives are disfigured by war.

We pray for ourselves, the often unwise stewards of the powers of the universe.
Transfigure the lives and cities scarred by conflict by the revealing of your glory
and move us by your uncreated energies to advance your sovereign purpose of peace.
This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our light and our salvation.

Amen.

A Prayer for Peace and Reconciliation

Heavenly Father,
you have called us in the Body of your Son Jesus Christ
to continue his work of reconciliation and reveal you to the world.
Forgive us the sins which tear us apart; give us the courage to overcome our fears
and to seek that unity which is your gift and your will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Blessing

Now may the Lord of peace himself
Who brought peace to the Syro-Phoenician woman and her daughter,
Give you peace at all times and in every way.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen