

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 16th August 2020

I have noticed over the years that there are some folk who are equal to any occasion.

A few years ago (like your previous Minister, the Revd George), I had the privilege of being Chaplain to the Royal Highland Agricultural Society at its Annual Show at Ingliston, near Edinburgh. Happy memories of a sparkling week in the sunshine, meeting hosts of fascinating people; being introduced to Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal; sitting beside the famous Chef, Martin Wishart, at lunch; broadening my knowledge of cattle and sheep and a whole host of other rural affairs; conducting Sunday morning worship in the Directors' Marquee.

The Board of Directors was kindness itself to me, helping this "townie" to enjoy every aspect of the event.

One of the many hilarious stories that I remember hearing was about a lady from the farming community who was attending a fairly high powered meeting, dominated by men.

They were discussing important issues critical to farmers and to agricultural communities.

Midway through the meeting, this lady stood up and said her piece, confidently and persuasively.

An old farmer from the area did not like this intrusion one bit.

He jumped to his feet and said, "What does she know about anything? I would like to ask her how many toes a pig has!"

Quick as a flash, the woman replied, "Take off your boots and count them yourself, Fred!"

No shrinking violet there!

In St Matthew's Gospel, we read of a woman who knew how to dish it out.

A Canaanite woman, which means that she was not Jewish, not part of Jesus' community of faith, not in His orbit, asked Him to heal her daughter.

But Jesus is pretty cool to the idea of helping this woman. Her initial approach is greeted with silence, and when she persists, Jesus says that He is focused on helping His own people. His reply seems very rude to our modern sensibilities. He appears very offhand.

When she still does not give up, Jesus gets a little petulant. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" He says.

But this mother is not only persistent, she is deeply religious and intellectually bright.

"Yes, Lord," she answers, "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master's table."

She catches Jesus off guard by her intelligence, wit and deep faith.

And healing happens.

This story about Jesus provides you and me with a powerful reason for openness and inclusivity – for inclusivity in our community of faith, for inclusivity in our own thinking.

The story teaches us that you never know from whom you will learn.

The story tells us that you never know where faith might be found.

The story reminds us that you never know what might expand your mind, enlarge your heart, enrich your soul.

As Christians, you and I need to be deeply grounded in the Scriptures and especially in its stories about our Lord.

Yet this very story about Jesus presses us also to be more open and inclusive in our community of faith of people who may be overlooked or traditionally excluded.

We are living in very difficult days across our world.

So much war; so much anger; so much distrust from nation to nation, culture to culture.

Racism, xenophobia, prejudice and bigotry are undoubtedly on the rise and being vocalised across the globe on a scale not witnessed for many generations.

Fear of the other; fear of the unknown, what we do not understand.

As followers of Jesus, we want to present a God who transcends barriers; we want to present a Church that is bigger than ignorance and hatred and prejudice; we want to model a way of living that shows hospitality and kindness to those who are different from us, those whose culture we may not understand.

If the Church of Jesus Christ will not take the lead in this at the current time, then who will?

It is only when the Canaanite woman has challenged Jesus that He shows the compassion and kindness that we expect from Him.

“Woman, great is your faith!” He says to her.

This woman whom Jesus encounters doesn't want to become one of His followers. She doesn't want to change her religion. She doesn't want to abandon her culture: why should she?

And Jesus never asks that of her.

Instead, she remains within her culture, remains within her own faith and Jesus reaches out to her exactly where she is. He doesn't try to convert her to His faith. Instead He honours her faith, and heals her daughter within that.

Friends, many churches really believe that if your name is not recorded in their books, then it is not in God's books either.

Christianity is full of folk who maintain that if you don't know Jesus the way I know Jesus, then you don't know Jesus at all.

And if you don't love God the way I love God, then God doesn't love you at all.

If you don't think what I believe about abortion, sexuality, the Bible, the beginning of life, world hunger, climate change, or religious clothing – then, sadly, God doesn't want you on the team.

That Canaanite woman ignored the gap between Jews and Gentiles.

Even if they were separated by a great distance, they were bound by a common humanity.

God's grace is for all.

At Trinity College in the University of Glasgow, I was very privileged to study Old Testament Language, Literature and Hebrew under the tutelage of the late Very Reverend Professor Robert Davidson, a superb Biblical scholar.

He was very supportive of all his students and had a special rapport with those of us who were planning on entering the Ministry. Indeed I was honoured when he accepted my invitation to him to "preach me in" in my first charge in the village of Neilston.

I remember on one occasion when Professor Davidson was reflecting with us on the question of salvation in the Old Testament, and one of my fellow students asked him, "Professor, do you think that it is possible for someone who is not a Christian to be loved by God, to be saved, to get into heaven?"

And I will never forget how he answered it.

He said, "I was born in the Kingdom of Fife, the son of faithful Christian parents who happened to be Protestant and Presbyterian, and as I grew and developed, and my faith and my spirituality developed, they did so in the context of Methil Parish Church where I had been baptised. If I had been a child born by the banks of the Ganges in India to Hindu parents and had continued in the same way to grow in my faith and to develop my spirituality and my relationship with God, I would have done so in the context of Hinduism. I do not believe that God writes us out of the book of life by dint of an accident of birth."

The mystery of salvation is God's work, not the Church's, not ours.

Yes, Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God; He was God in human flesh, but like Him that day long ago in the presence of the Canaanite woman, we can be very surprised in finding great faith in unexpected places.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister