Trinity 15B James 2: 1-17; Mark 7: 24-end

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Nothing ventured, nothing gained might be a phrase that springs to mind looking at today’s gospel reading. While there are plenty of stories about healing in the gospels, this is the only tale in which Jesus changes his mind. But it is a gospel of two halves.

I have heard it argued that Jesus didn’t change anything; he was merely playing this scene for dramatic effect, to get the people – Jews obviously – who were watching, to agree with him that Gentiles were dogs, scum - and then to turn on them and debunk the idea that it was OK to refer to them in such a way.

But actually, to my mind, we have to remember that Jesus was human in his incarnation, was born a Jew, and was culturally Jewish. And that means we have to entertain the idea that he did indeed think that his role was to bring, first and foremost, the Jews to himself. So in fact, this encounter opens him to the possibility of who he really is.

You may or may not be aware that the 9.45 service this morning will include the baptism of two small children – I think one of them is just about old enough to complain if I were to refer to her as a baby. And so I have been thinking about baptism this weekend and writing a baptism sermon for that service.

So it was inevitable that some of that should spill over when I started thinking about the readings, and particularly the gospel, and what I was going to say to you now at eight o’clock.

Just in case you need a little reminder of the story of Jesus’ own baptism, it tells that when Jesus came up out of the water – full immersion in the river Jordan, remember – something like a dove was seen over his head, and the voice of God was heard declaring: This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased.

So that explains a bit about the descent of the Holy Spirit on the baptised and gives us a sense that God is calling each of those who are baptised – and those of you who maybe aren’t yet baptised – to a particular role - and for all of us to become the people God wants us to become.

So for Jesus too, the coming of the spirit was an experience of him being open to who God was calling him to be. This outsider - she was a woman and a foreigner - helped Jesus to reject the Jewish exclusivity he had previously taken for granted.

What, I wonder, are the exclusivities that we take for granted? And if we are to take this gospel seriously, whatever those exclusivities are, we have to look and move and grow beyond them.

Jesus had started off with the assumption that his mission was exclusively to the Jews, the inheritors of the traditions of Moses and the prophets. But a gentile woman refused to be squashed. We’ve seen Jesus being tetchy before, but this is really rather shocking. Jesus calls her people, calls all Gentile peoples ‘dogs’.

But she, fortunately, is sharp enough – and perhaps desperate enough that her daughter should be healed – that she is not prepared to take the insult and go quietly away. She turns his insult into a rationale for helping her. Why would I throw my time and energy to you, a dog, when it belongs rightly with the children (children of Israel), Jesus says. And she responds: the dogs might be under the table, but they still get the crumbs of whatever the children are having.

And while this particular outsider is a woman, what if the outsider were a biker meeting a banker? Or a Muslim meeting a Christian? Or a homeless person meeting someone who drives a four by four with a personalised plate?

In this story, the whole issue of stratification - layers of priority - and hierarchy comes up even in the realm of healing. If it is true that Jesus came first for the children of Israel and only after that for the rest, the woman demonstrates that perseverance and protest can bring about a new pattern. Syrophoenician or not, the woman’s daughter is healed, delivered, and set free.

Digging into this text is uncomfortable. But so is uncovering the wounds and scars of racism or abuse in relation to church complicity. Maybe the directness of the dialogue between Jesus and this unnamed Syrophoenician woman reminds us to name our differences and call out our hierarchies. If there is to be any chance of healing and restoration, it is an essential first step.

A necessary part of wholeness is the sense of belonging. Both belonging to one another and belonging in our own skin. At first, Jesus rejects the Syrophoenician woman’s plea to cure her daughter, because she does not belong to his people. But as the woman dismantles Jesus’ sense of being limited by his culture, we realise that this is the point at which the gospel comes to belong to all of us. This is a turning point for all of us who, not being Jews, are Gentiles like she is. The message is now loud and clear – we all belong to God through Jesus.

I said it was a gospel of two halves, and so we move to the second part of this gospel. This bit is the story of the deaf and speech impaired man; Jesus lays his hands on him and then looks up to heaven – prays the word Ephphatha, meaning Be open. And while that Be open might have been aimed at the man’s ears and tongue, in a sense, we have to be equally opened – to cross those boundaries that we encounter.

In the way of these things sometimes, this now comes full circle, back to baptism. I didn’t know until yesterday, but apparently the Roman Catholic rite of baptism includes a point at which the priest may touch the ears and mouth of the newly-baptised child and says some words, the gist of which are: may Jesus touch your ears to hear his word and your mouth to proclaim faith in him.

So, nothing ventured, nothing gained: we rejoice that the good news of the Jewish people became the good news for all people. May we all show ourselves brave in naming our faith, and open to crossing boundaries, not building walls.

**Amen**