Trinity 11A: Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8; Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: 21-28

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

How often does scripture make your feel uncomfortable? Which bits of scripture and why? For me, it can be the bits where the Lord is on the side of the Israelites in battle, and supposedly rejoicing at the slaughter of thousands of foreigners. Or the Lord being on the side of the Israelites in terms of being especially concerned with their well-being, their history, their future. That also makes me uncomfortable. And of course we can find ways of making stuff like that sit within our wider theological understanding: God chose a representative people from whom salvation for all the world would come. He was with them in order to be with all people. And all that stuff normally finds its expression within the Old Testament – and we feel generally further removed from the Old Testament than we do from the New; that’s how people can mistakenly interpret the so-called God of the Old Testament as wrathful and vengeful and all those things – entirely wrongly of course, but understandably nonetheless.

But gentle Jesus, meek and mild, rarely comes out with lines that are less than loving, even when they are quite robust. Until today, when he drops that line about taking food from the children and throwing it to the dogs: can he really be referring to a whole ethnic group as dogs? Less than human? Have the translators somehow made a mistake in the translating? Or the transcribing? One minute Jesus is saying, quite mildly it seems: I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. And the next, this ‘dogs’ bit. Yet another minute and he is saying: woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted.

And all this is set against that phrase we heard from Isaiah: Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

Since forever, commentators have been at pains to work through this image of Jesus created by this particular story: he was tired and fed-up, or it sounds worse to modern ears than it would have been at the time, or he was testing the woman. We want to defend him, excuse the language, make this whole passage less challenging.

And of course, there are many passages in the Bible which are way more challenging than this one, but let’s stick with this one for now. But without sanitising it for our own benefit.

This woman is the quintessential outsider – by virtue of her ethnicity and her gender at very least. But we know all that. What can we learn from the story itself? Here is a mother; a proper tiger mother. She is willing to do whatever it takes to get her demon-possessed daughter healed. This takes us back to the Isaiah reading: she may be an outsider but what she knows about God is that God’s mercy and love and healing are intended for all people – boundaries are immaterial, even those boundaries that seemed to be governing Jesus’ own ministry.

It shines a light on Jesus’ humanity first and then on his divinity. His view of this woman was shaped by his culture, on the racial and ethnic hierarchy he had grown up with. And his view of his immediate ministry was built on that culture too. The Israelites were God’s chosen people and had been since the beginning of Time. For a moment, this understanding prevented him from seeing the full humanity of this woman, and her desperate love of her daughter, and her desperate need of his help.

It is so easy to be blind to the humanity and needs of people who are not like us: people who don’t look like us, or think like us, or talk like us. We generalise about whole groups of people based maybe on one encounter with one person. But, as Jesus does here, we can also revise our preconceptions.

This Canaanite woman, with her quick response, causes Jesus to understand his call to ministry differently. The persistence and faith of this woman – that Jesus is the only person who can help her daughter – results in a positive outcome all round. And the racism inherent in Jesus’ culture is exposed for what it is. Earlier in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus sends the out disciples telling them specifically NOT to go to the Gentiles or to Samaria, but by the end it, he is sending them out to make disciples of all nations - where nations actually means ethnicities – and to the ends of the earth.

Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table. By this one woman’s act, the extent of God’s kingdom and the inclusiveness of God’s grace is realised.

In a world where boundaries are drawn all over the place – both real and metaphorical – none is a boundary for God. So the wall between the USA and Mexico isn’t built yet, but people tore down the Berlin Wall, in part with bare hands. But people make boundaries based on fear – of what is not known or not understood; of what is different – and God doesn’t. The circle of God’s love is all-encompassing – wider, larger, deeper than we can possibly imagine or understand. The fierceness with which that mother loved her child and wanted the best for her is a mere shadow of the love God has for his children. All of them, with no exceptions.

Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest, said this: It would seem that, quite possibly, the ultimate measure of health in any community might well reside in our ability to stand in awe at what folks have to carry, rather than in judgment at how they carry it. He put his money where his mouth was when he founded what is now the world’s largest gang and drug-related rehabilitation scheme, based on the Christian principle of healing through relationship. It is, he says, God’s dream come true when we recognise that there exists no daylight between us. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop.

The Canaanite woman stood with Jesus, even before Jesus stood with her, so that the demonizing her daughter endured would stop. And stand with her he did.

There are no boundaries to God’s love. And this is our identity as Christians – to love as He loves us.

So, when scripture makes us uncomfortable, we mustn’t duck out or dodge it, but pursue the thought. What might that discomfort be encouraging us to see, and how might our discomfort point us to new insight, or new understanding of God?

It was VJ Day yesterday – we stand with those who have fought against oppressive regimes both ancient and more recent. We stand against injustice – remembering all those students whose places at university are no longer safe or have been revoked. We stand for compassion; for equality; against poverty. May we be as brave and bold and fierce and persistent as this woman.

**Amen**