



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.
Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever witnessed somebody else being subjected to a form of prejudice? How did you respond to this?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise – Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
**that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.**
Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
**for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.**

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.

**May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of love and life,
you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.
We bring to you those things in our own lives
and within the life of the world we share
in need of transformation and fresh hope:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
God of mercy, forgive us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
God of love, comfort us.

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:
God of justice, disturb us.

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:
God of courage, fortify us.

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:
God of liberation, convict us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of love and life,
you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.
Set us free us to follow you,
and grant us that peace which passes all our understanding.

Amen

Reading Matthew 15:21 – 28

Sermon

One of the joys of following the Lectionary – the set readings for any given Sunday – is the way it encourages us to work through a whole Gospel throughout the course of a year and thus to engage with the teaching of Jesus, as well as the events at the beginning and ending of his earthly life remembered respectively at Christmas and Easter. However, this is also one of the biggest challenges with following it, because while its scope is necessarily selective, it nonetheless puts before us some rather difficult readings to grapple with. The Gospel text for this week is one such example. Having been embroiled in a heated argument with Pharisees and Scribes, who travelled up from Jerusalem to Galilee in order to confront him, Jesus led his disciples into the predominantly Gentile areas of Tyre and Sidon, presumably hoping for some respite. Yet, he once again found himself called on to help somebody in need, and his initial responses to that unnamed woman have troubled many commentators down the centuries. The presence within Scripture of stories which provoke strong emotional reactions – abhorrence, disgust, sadness, anger, shock, fearfulness and so forth – cannot be denied.

Broadly speaking, we may respond to these sorts of texts in one of three different ways:

Firstly, we can simply ignore them, cutting them out of our lectionary altogether, or skipping over them in our personal Bible reading plan. Now, there may be times when this is necessary. As a postgraduate student, I attended Choral Evensong in the cathedral most evenings during the week, and over the course of a month, the choir sang the Psalms set for each day. Given there was no opportunity to put what they sang into context, it would not have been appropriate to repeat the desire of the writer of Psalm 137 to see the heads of the children of their Babylonian oppressors dashed against the rocks! Choosing to miss out those verses made sense in that particular situation; yet, it is also true that we must not keep taking a scalpel to the Scriptures every time we find a text difficult. After all, if we accept that the Holy Spirit had something to do with the compilation of the biblical canon, it is surely not for us to keep cutting bits out. A second strategy used with challenging texts is to water them down, in an attempt to render them more palatable for our modern sensibilities. In this case, I have known preachers to insist that those dogs to which Jesus compared the woman were really ‘cute puppies’, or that the exchange between them was just ‘banter’, neither of which truly washes.

The third approach takes a rather different route, and I am indebted to Rev Dr Miranda Threlfall-Holmes for the thought. What if the texts we label as difficult, and that provoke strong emotion within us, were selected from amongst the myriad of stories which could have made it into the biblical canon *precisely because we are supposed to react to them thus?* What if our gut responses to episodes like this week’s Gospel passage reflect how God wants us to feel? Threlfall-Holmes invites us to have the courage to take this emotion seriously so that, for example, when we are appalled by stories of violence and hatred in the Scriptures, we recognise that we feel like that exactly because we *should* be appalled by such things. In turn, this may highlight to us something of our own ‘shadow side’ – aspects of ourselves which we normally try to ignore, deny or suppress – requiring us to engage

in painful but honest self-reflection. Alternatively, our passion being evoked by Scripture may point to what we care about most and thus towards the vocation to which God calls us.

So, where might this third approach lead us? Well, one crucial detail we need to notice comes in 15:22, with that unnamed woman being described by the author of Matthew's Gospel as a 'Canaanite'. This was the second Gospel to be written, and the parallel story in Mark's version labels her the Syrophenician woman (see Mark 7:24 – 30), so why the change? Recall that, when Israel entered the land which God promised them during their decades of wilderness wanderings, it was already occupied by the Canaanites. Centuries-old prejudice between nations were being evoked for Matthew's readers by using this term, something that becomes all the clearer when we note that there were no Canaanites still alive at the time of Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, the woman showed great courage in approaching an almost certainly hostile group who would have been brought up with tales of how awful the ancestors of her people were, all for the sake of her daughter who was being plagued by a demon.

Unlike in Mark's earlier version, the disciples play a central role here and for me, the scene reads like something out of an opera. On one side, the woman was singing an aria of pleading, beseeching Jesus for his urgent aid (15:22), while on the other side, the disciples were mocking her, using a Greek word similar to that she used for 'mercy' in their chorus of urging for Jesus to 'get rid of her' (15:23). Stuck in the middle of all this glamour, we find him at first trying to ignore the woman's pleas (15:23) and then plicating his disciples by saying he had been sent to help the people of Israel alone (15:24). Despite all this, the woman showed great resilience and further courage as she made sure Jesus could not neglect her any longer, throwing herself at his feet and again asking for mercy (15:25). What happened next reminds me of a scene early on the musical *Grease*, when the newly arrived Sandy sees the object of her summer romance at school but

Johnny shuns her in front of his mates. Depicting that woman – and by implication her daughter, and indeed her whole community – like dogs waiting to steal children's food from the table (15:26) was cruel and again evoked insults used by Israelites to Canaanites in ancient days. In this 'othering', we see the worst of human nature, and while the woman's response (15:27) brought him up short and highlighted her full humanity to him (15:28), Jesus does not come off well here.

I think we are meant to be shocked and upset by this narrative which does not hold back in its presentation of national animosity. For me, while we may well admire the woman's courage and resilience, she should not have needed to be either of these things for Jesus to see past that which divided them to see another human being, a mother desperate for help for her daughter and presumably at her wit's end. How we reconcile this with the idea of Jesus as sinless is something I freely admit I struggle with, even as the healing at the close shows the best of humanity. It is too easy to excuse his behaviour by using the modern notion of unconscious bias, and even if we accept those readings casting the dogs as cute puppies at a congenial family tea, and Jesus as bantering with the woman, we are still left with a tough event to reconcile with the compassion Jesus readily demonstrated in earlier episodes (see Matthew 9:35 – 38, for example).

My take-away from all this is that the story is shocking and upsetting because it shows the realities of prejudice and othering, which blight our world to this day and which the Church is called to address. The full humanity of others, whether they come from a different piece of land to us or have a different skin colour, is not up for debate. Same is true with those other characteristics used to drive people apart in the culture wars being raged around us. Jesus comes to recognise, albeit after displaying less than admirable behaviours, that kneeling before him was a woman made in the image of God as much as the sheep of the house of Israel to which his initial mission was directed. When we are tempted to fall into the same trap he did at first and to

neglect the needs of others because they are different to us in some way, may we recall the discomfort of this story and look for common humanity, so that all may flourish. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who ultimately died and rose again for the sake of love. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

Al Barrett and Ruth Harley's 2020 book *Being Interrupted* examines how Jesus' flow was interrupted by the Canaanite woman's actions.

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing