



Sunday Reflection

11th Sunday after Pentecost

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 16 August 2020

Pentecost 11

while all Church worship in the buildings is suspended

On this 11th Sunday after Pentecost, and the tenth Sunday after Trinity, in these summer weeks, we step aside from the ordinary routines of life and pray for a fresh perspective on ourselves and those around us, asking for faith to see as God sees, and to look again for God's purposes in our lives..

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'" Matthew 15.28

An Illustration to set the scene

It's said that there's a field in Gloucestershire marked by the ruts made by cars following their sat navs, ending up stuck in the mud, having to be pulled out by the local farmer. Never mind "Make a U turn when possible", it's evidence of people following commands having lost all sense of how to reach their destination. This is how it is for those who blindly follow instructions, forgetting that the purpose is to guide them towards a destination. The way to avoid "sat nav blindness" – which has resulted in widespread inability to read actual maps, or to make sense of the route we are on – is to keep a clear vision of the overall direction and goal of the journey.

It's the same with the laws of scripture. They are there as guidance in our lives with God, leading us towards the kingdom of justice, mercy and peace, and not ends in themselves. When we find ourselves in a dead end, which doesn't look like the kingdom that Jesus describes, we need to backtrack and find the right route.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

Immediately prior to the exchange in today's Gospel reading Jesus has been ministering in the region of Galilee, drawing crowds. We are told that Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem to challenge him for not honouring Jewish ritual purity traditions concerning eating, and that Jesus rebuffed them with a counter accusation that they served God outwardly but not with the heart.

Part of today's Gospel is optional in today's reading. In it, Jesus calls the crowd back after the visitors have left, to further explain that it's what goes on inside us that determines whether we are serving God in our lives. He drives this home in the exchange with Peter, describing his accusers as "blind guides" who have completely missed the point of the Law, which is there to guide us in how to serve God.

Jesus then continues north into the borderlands. Though it is beyond Israel, many Israelites are living there. His initial response to the local resident who comes seeking healing – "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" – is deeply shocking to our ears. Then he appears to soften his tone considerably when he says, "great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish". Attempts to explain why he spoke so apparently harshly to start with can only be conjectural. Perhaps he was making a point, to shock his hearers into understanding

that someone like this, although not an Israelite, would not be excluded from God's healing plan. Or we might even see the softening of Jesus' tone as evidence that he himself is growing into an understanding of the sheer breadth of his own mission, starting to realise that it would be extraordinary to exclude the Gentiles from the message of salvation.

Whatever Jesus' intention, the conclusion is clear: it is belief, rather than background or behaviour, that opens the possibility of God's work of healing and salvation within us.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

In order faithfully to follow Jesus, we need to remember that he came to call all, without exception, into a loving, reconciled relationship with God and one another. There are no exceptions – no one is excluded from the invitation and demand of this relationship.

If we doubt that we can be part of the new kingdom, the story of the Canaanite woman should encourage us to have faith that God wants to receive us just as much as others who may appear to have a prior call on God's love.

Alternatively, if we believe that God's love for us is to the exclusion of others, this Gospel reading should remind us that, although God's love will always be there for us, there is also space for those who don't share our background or faith tradition.

Furthermore, we are not to concern ourselves too much with the minutiae of religious practice. The goal of our religious life is to draw closer to God for ourselves, and to build the kingdom for the sake of others. If we ensure that our primary ambition is to

put our lives into God's hands, the detail is less important than the desire.

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’” Matthew 15.28

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God' spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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