

SERMON for Pentecost 16 - September 8th, 2024.

Readings: Isaiah 35: 4-7a; Psalm 146; James 2: 1-10, 14-17; Mark 7: 24-37.

To me, today's readings speak about God's inclusiveness, his care of 'widows and orphans' and those who are powerless, calling us to be mindful and open to those less fortunate than ourselves.

James challenges his readers:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? [James 2: 1]

And he goes on to talk about our reaction when visitors come into our church, which sparked a memory from a several years ago.

I had started the service one Sunday, when I walked a big tanned, gentleman, short dark hair, wearing sandals, light brown shorts and a short sleeved, khaki, open neck shirt - a little different to everyone dressed in their Sunday best for church! There were a few frowns and scowls around the church, but worship continued without missing a beat. It turned out that he was a wandering Englishman, who had just moved to town and was working at the local Aboriginal school. He stayed with us for about 2 years and became an integral part of our congregation during that time, but the initial reaction generally was one of shock and disapproval from the congregation.

God is impartial ... are we?

God calls us to be open to others and our reading from Isaiah is full of hope for those who are doing it tough:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. [Isaiah 35: 4a, 5-6]

The gospel reading reflects something of the wholeness Jesus offers.

Jesus had retired to the territory of Tyre for a bit of R&R. He was probably tired because the demands on him were getting more and more draining.

A few wanted to listen to his teaching, but most wanted the excitement of witnessing a miracle. The Pharisees, the most powerful of the religious authorities, felt threatened by Jesus' reinterpretation of the Law. Generally, they didn't like him and were trying to trick him into doing or saying something that would convict him. Wherever Jesus went he attracted crowds which the Pharisees felt drew the focus away from them and their importance. So, Jesus retired to a place where he was relatively unknown, and where he can get a little rest before he knew he had to turn towards Jerusalem and the final show-down.

Into this scenario comes a desperate mother with a sick child. She is prepared to go to any lengths to make her child well again. She hears that Jesus is close by and goes to see him. She is a woman, he is a man. She a Gentile, he a Jew. Jesus is breaking Jewish law by even speaking to her, but he is grudgingly impressed by her persistence.

Then we have the story of the man who is deaf and severely speech impaired. He is brought before Jesus, perhaps by his friends, keen for him to be made whole.

These two stories mark a pivotal point in Jesus' ministry.

Up to this point in the story, Jesus is focused on the dream of trying to revive and renew the Judaism of his day. He thinks this is what he is called to do. He is increasingly frustrated by the opposition of the Pharisees and the intransigence of the traditionalists, but he is not yet ready to let go of the dream of working for good within the limits of what is there.

Then, in the midst of his frustration about the covenant community and on retreat from his struggle with the structures, he meets a Gentile woman who challenges him and his own wisdom suddenly opens up (Eph-pha-tha!!!!) to a whole new world of possibilities for him. Suddenly it all makes sense in a brand-new way. Of course! God is at work beyond the limits of the covenant community! The kingdom is bigger than the people of Israel! And it's time to step out into it!¹

She challenges Jesus to look at a bigger picture – not just the Jews, but all humankind.

Sometimes it takes someone outside our structures, perhaps even someone totally unexpected, to teach us a new way of thinking or looking at things. “Ephaphatha” ... “be opened!”

While Jesus used that when healing the man in the Decapolis, we could make the same call on our hearts and minds.

How can we re-think our religious and social structures? What are the important issues for us?

The second part of our reading from James has always haunted me. I am naturally more of an introvert, I tend to be a person more comfortable with “Being” rather than “Doing”. I have always loved the story of Martha and Mary, and would love to be Mary, sitting at Jesus’ feet, and yet there is a part of me who is driven to “Do”, a voice from my childhood that accuses me of “being lazy”!

James’ words always hit me between the eyes:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. [James 2: 14-17]

The challenge I see in today’s readings is to open up my thinking, to be more active, more open, more accepting, less judgemental about the people and situations which come my way.

What can I do? How might I speak the words of peace, of healing, of hope, contribute to the material need in this aching world?

Let us pray:

Lord, give us the imagination to dream and catch glimpses of the life you intend for us to live. Show us how our individual lives are entwined with those around us, and help us to live so truly together that we embody your good news in this world. Amen.²

Revd Sally Buckley
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2. *Common Prayer: A liturgy for ordinary radicals*. Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove and Enuma Okoro; © 1975, 2010, Zondervan e-book.