

In many ways our bible reading this morning has to be one of the hardest to understand passages in the bible. It contains two “healing” stories which could not be described more differently – certainly in terms of the details they give – and actually how Jesus treated the people who he met.

You see, both the events happen deep in Gentile country, and at least up until this point, Jesus has made it quite clear that his first priority is to the Jewish people – his people – God’s chosen people. We don’t know why Jesus has gone to the area that he is in, but he is as far from Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish world, that we believe he goes during his ministry. We hear a lot in the gospels about Jesus teaching the Jews, but there is no evidence of him teaching the Gentiles – yes he performed healings and exorcisms for the Gentiles but he appears to make no attempts to teach them why he can do these things. But there is something even stranger going on here in the first story. You may have noticed it and you may now be asking yourselves, “Did Jesus really just call that Syrophenician woman a dog”?

Jesus is always portrayed as a gentle, loving, but very much a non-compromising person. If someone tries to trick him, he will respond, and win, the argument, and he will say harsh words – but normally only to those people with real authority. But would he resort to insulting someone like this desperate Gentile woman? Well you wouldn’t have thought so. But here we have someone who has clearly heard of Jesus, and what he can do, and her daughter is being affected by the presence of a demon – precisely what that means we don’t know, but clearly there is something that is having a very bad effect on this girl and her mother is seriously worried.

Perhaps the reason that Jesus is in this area far away from Jerusalem is that his disciples still didn’t understand what was going on and so Jesus wanted to find a quiet place to have another go at explaining what had happened and what was about to happen. He didn’t want people to come and ask for healing – he had another job to do. And this Syrophenician woman collared Jesus and, “begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.”

Right, time for a brief interlude – and apologies here must be given to dog lovers, because in biblical times, dogs were not considered the “adorable, persons best friend” animals that many people see them as today. Almost all Old Testament references to dogs associate them with uncleanness (and sorry about this image but it is true) it’s because they ate garbage and the flesh of dead animals, decaying or not. In the New Testament things get no better – Jesus describes human wretchedness as being like a street mongrel licking the sores of a beggar, and Paul refers to his opponents as dogs. And I could go on. But the important point of all this is that the Jewish people saw the Gentiles as outsiders, as a lower form of people, as people who God has rejected, and so the Jews would describe Gentiles as dogs.

And so when Jesus says, to this Gentile woman in response to her plea for help for her daughter, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” – what he actually means is that the children are the Jews – God’s chosen people – and so it would not be right for him, Jesus, to stop teaching a group of Jews and heal a Gentile instead – because the dogs he is referring to are the Gentiles. Jesus is simply talking to this Gentile woman in the accepted way that Jews would talk about Gentiles. You, Gentile woman, are a dog, one of those creatures that we want nothing to do with. Ouch

But that can’t possibly come from the loving caring Jesus who is my, our, Saviour protector, friend, can it? Well, perhaps we need to look at what happens next – and perhaps this Gentile woman is really significant in the whole development of Christianity. She doesn’t take this statement as an insult, but more an acceptance of who she is. She is not interested in whether she is part of an

accepted race or not, she needs help for her daughter and she needs the power that she trusts that Jesus has got. She cannot accept defeat – the love for her daughter is too strong for that. “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” This woman is understanding so much about Jesus, who he is, and what he is there for. What she is realising is that at this stage of Jesus’ ministry, his main target group is the Jewish community, but just because she is not a Jew does not mean that there is nothing left for her – she somehow has the understanding, the belief, the trust in Jesus to argue that there are the parts of Jesus’s power and love that the Jews have rejected, and she is saying, “That is good enough for me.” And Jesus, clearly amazed by the faith of this Gentile woman pretty much says - , “well, yes, you have a point, you can have what you came for”; he recognises the trust in this woman, “For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter.” This woman has almost certainly not been taught anything about Jesus – yet she has faith in him, in what he can do, she really trusts him. Perhaps Jesus has been taught something by this Gentile woman?

Our second healing story is a lot simpler to understand – as we are given lots of detail as to what’s going on. We have a deaf man, who also has a speech impediment. Because we are in the region of the Decapolis, he is probably another Gentile. Some people, we don’t really know who, brought him to Jesus to be healed, and Jesus, no arguments this time, took him to one side, and healed him – and we were told in the reading how he did it. Jesus put his fingers in his ears and he spat and touched his tongue, and the man could hear, and he could speak in a way that people could understand. This Gentile man could now understand what Jesus – and Jesus’ disciples, could say to him. Jesus had made that possible. And what had made that possible – the faith, the trust this group of people had in Jesus’ ability to heal this deaf man. And perhaps a lesson taught to Jesus by the Syrophenician woman.

So in both these stories Jesus had removed a barrier between people and God – in the first case it was the barrier of simply being a Gentile and in the second case it was a medical barrier of deafness and a speech impediment.

When we talked earlier about trust, there could be no barrier between the person who needed something and the thing or person they needed to trust. Otherwise what they were trying to do could only go wrong. The people in our stories had trust in Jesus and barriers were removed. They had no great knowledge of Jesus, of what had happened in the Old Testament, but they did not let that get in the way. We don’t know what happened to them after these events, but I can’t really believe that once these healings had happened they would not at least try to find out more.

When we talked about trust I left you with this picture. Across our four parishes in the next few months our PCC members are, in effect, going to start the process of thinking about how we can remove the barriers between the people of our villages and God. We are going to be looking at the sort of services, or other activities, that we could hold to help remove those barriers. Who is it in our villages that we are trying to reach? Are there specific groups of people that we could particularly help? Is this door a real barrier to some people? Angela and I spend quite a lot of our time talking to people about baptisms, about weddings, about funerals in their own homes. All these people want to come to our churches for these events – but then they don’t want to come to a service on a Sunday morning. We need to challenge ourselves by asking why not. Are there practical reasons - time / day of services, uncomfortable, cold, sometimes inaccessible to them, buildings. Or is there a lack of trust? Do they have the sort of trust in Jesus that our two healed people had – and if not, why not?

Finding those answers may be a long process – but we all need to trust in God that he will help us to find those answers. We are in this together. We need to come to God in prayer and ask him for guidance as to what we should be doing differently because it cannot be right that we are such a small, albeit very faithful, group here this morning when you consider all the people in our villages who are not here. And we must trust that God will not only show the answer, but he will give us the way to implement that answer. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Let’s try and remove barriers, to build trust, to help that happen.