

Trinity 11 2023, Eucharist

Isaiah 56:1,6-8, Psalm 67, Romans 11:1-2a,29-32 and Matthew 15:1-28

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When was the last time you offended someone? Think about it. How did you feel? How did the other person feel? Most of the time when we offend someone, we feel horribly guilty, as it is usually unintentional; and the person feeling offended might feel shocked, as though you have written them off perhaps, as though you don't understand them, or value them. We generally try not to offend others. Offence is personal. It is not argument, or debate. To offend someone you really have to hit at the core of who they are, or something they value so much that it feels like *part* of who they are, their identity.

Well, this morning Jesus manages to offend two people within a very short space of time. Or rather he offends one group, and then an individual, a woman, whose daughter is seriously ill.

In the first of our encounters, the disciples say to Jesus, '*Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?*' Jesus has just poo-pood the Pharisees' traditional hand-washing before eating, so as, in their eyes, to be ritually pure.

It's important to point out that this is not a requirement of the Law, of Leviticus; rather it is a tradition of the Pharisees, an extension of the Law. Jesus doesn't worry about offending them, but simply says, '*It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.*' How many of us would instead have tried to cause as little offence as possible?

Spoken of the importance of respecting the Pharisees' tradition?

Well there are I think two reasons why Jesus doesn't take that position. One is that He is speaking to them as an insider, as a fellow Jew at least; not in the way that we as outsiders speaking to a Jew might quite rightly want to show respect – because we are not in the same tradition, the same religion. But secondly, I think Jesus must be speaking to them as He is because their insistence on their tradition is leading others astray; it has become a stumbling block. They are the blind leading the blind – what they are doing is not required by the Law, and it leads people to think that they are pure for complying with the tradition; while being blind to what really matters, the bad intentions that come from the heart, and lead to true sins.

How many of us might feel that we are righteous, we are better than those outside, those walking past our church, rather than coming in? We *must* be better than them, because we come to church every week. Well sometimes, to make people sit up and listen, and to reflect on their own failings, it is necessary to offend people. In the oft-quoted words of the journalist Finlay Peter Dunne on the purpose of newspapers, we are here to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable. And gentle words don't afflict the comfortable into change.

So far, so good. Jesus offending the Pharisees most of us can probably live with.

But in the second part of our gospel Jesus offends the mother of a sick girl, seemingly gratuitously. And this is far harder to stomach. She is a Canaanite, i.e. of the people whose land the Israelites took when they crossed into the Promised Land.

And Jesus says to her, '*It is not fair to take the children's food [i.e. the Jews'] and throw it to the dogs.*'

Can you imagine a modern Israeli saying that to a Palestinian? That gives you an idea of just how offensive Jesus's words are.

So, what are we to make of them? How could He justify causing such pain? Well, before I answer that, I think this passage is a useful reminder of the fact that Jesus was primarily coming as the Messiah to the Jewish people, to the people of Israel. We as Christians believe that they were and are God's chosen people. We, most of us, as Gentiles, were grafted in. We believe that we have essentially been adopted into the people of Israel.

Having been adopted, we know from St Paul's letter to the Galatians that it then doesn't matter whether you were originally Jew or Gentile, but that does not alter the chosen nature of the people of Israel, which we have joined. It is very easy to forget that I think in our quite correct enthusiasm to welcome all. But not all come, and we are only here through the grace of God, not our own achievement; just as the people of Israel were chosen by grace.

At the time of Jesus, the Canaanite woman would have been of very low status in Israel, and Jesus's words to her would have reflected the way she was used to being treated, being called a dog. (Though, in a hint, *only* a hint, of light, the word Jesus uses is closer to puppy.) And Jesus starts off by answering the disciples' request to send her away by saying that '*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*' That is the Jewish understanding of the Messiah. But while we know that the Jews were thought to have priority in hearing the gospel, we know that Jesus also reached out to Gentiles, that they were also drawn to Him. So, in saying He was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, Jesus is patently telling her an untruth here. Why? For those who believe that everything Jesus says must be literally true, this is troubling. Well, He's doing it to offend her, and in offending her, to test her. She simply responds, '*Lord, help me.*' And then, when He says the very worst thing to her, that it is not fair to throw the children's food to the dogs, rather than crumpling into tears, or running away and hiding, as would seem natural, and certainly understandable, she argues back: '*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*' At this moment, the mask falls from Jesus's face. He has tested her with His offensive words, and she has passed. '*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly.*' And so, this story works through great irony, as with so much of Jesus's teaching. Here we have a woman who is reviled by all, as being beyond the pale, beyond the chosen, saved people of Israel. Jesus joins in the condemnation of her, first of all by not answering; then by saying that He was not sent to such people; and then by calling her a dog. That shocks us, but it fitted with how others would have treated her. And yet, and yet, she falls at His feet and says '*Lord, help me.*'

Does anyone remember last week's gospel? What did Peter say to Jesus as he was sinking? '*Lord, save me!*' From our places of plenty and of privilege we should be longing for the emptiness of Peter and of the Syro-Phoenician woman, because they know their need of Jesus, in a way that we cannot. They know that only He can lift them up and save them, whereas it is all too tempting for us to seek to rely on ourselves, on the things we think we deserve through our own achievement. And yet all that we need is the simple faith of this woman, overlooked by all. And then we have the pearl of great price, we have the kingdom of heaven. After all the insults, the testing, Jesus acclaims our heroine here: '*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*'

All who seemed privileged before, the Pharisees, Jesus's disciples, they melt into the background as the flawed, sinful people that they are. We would fall into that category. We do all the right things. But this woman should be our model, as we stand with the flawed disciples, with Peter and the others, wanting to do it all ourselves, and gaze in awe at one such as her, who is so totally dependent on Jesus, and whose faith is so great. Amen