**Matthew 15:21-28**

**Standing against racism and xenophobia**

These are difficult days across the world, aren’t they? So much war, so much anger, so much distrust from nation to nation, culture to culture.

At its most benign level, we see the UK and the EU taking positions for Brexit negotiations with talk about what are the red lines that cannot be crossed when it comes to seeking compromise. At a more frightening level, we see Donald Trump and North Korea posturing and issuing threats to one another, bringing the world to the brink of utter catastrophe. At local levels, we see white supremacists and Nazi sympathisers in Charlottesville invoking violence to try and defend a heritage that is simply indefensible. And time and time again, we see refugees and immigrants scapegoated for so many of the ills in society across so many countries, and displaced, vulnerable people so often being treated little better than animals.

Racism, xenophobia and fear of other cultures is undoubtedly on the rise and being vocalised across the world on a scale not witnessed for many generations.

Fear of The Other. Fear of what we do not know, what we do not understand.

As Christians, we want to present a God who transcends racism and xenophobia. We want to present a church that is bigger than ignorance and hatred. We want to model a way of living that shows hospitality and kindness to those of other cultures, and those whose culture we may not understand.

If the Church will not take the lead in this at the current time – then who will?

And so, in the light of that, we might find this morning’s Gospel reading more than a little embarrassing. Because the underlying emotions running through this passage are emotions of fear of another culture and a desire to ignore and not interact with someone from that other culture.

We perhaps wish that Jesus and the disciples would behave a bit differently - but they don’t. We are embarrassed by their actions.

Think about Jesus first. He doesn’t across as a particularly pleasant character, does he? He doesn’t seem to take the woman’s pain very seriously. He uses derogatory language when he addresses her and it appears at first glance as if he is being racist in his approach. That’s not the Jesus we want to present in today’s social and political climate…

And, quite frankly, his disciples are even worse…They are clearly acting in a racist and xenophobic way and they seem to believe that they have superiority as Jews over other races and they don’t want to engage on any level with this outsider in their midst.

If we are going to stay true to the text, there is no easy way to explain away what is going on here. Their behaviour is not pleasant. They do not act as we would want them to.

So why on earth does Matthew include this story in his Gospel? There were plenty of other stories he could have told – much nicer ones. So why does he include this one? What does Matthew want us to learn from this uncomfortable encounter?

Let’s just recap the story together - and you can follow it on Page 18 in the New Testament section of the Bible if you want to.

In verse 21, we are told that, “Jesus went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon”. This is not the region that Jesus would normally have visited: these were non-Jewish areas, Gentile regions; this was Bandit-country as far as the Jews were concerned. So why did Jesus go there?

We can’t be sure, of course, but we know that Jesus understood the fact that his public ministry was soon to end, and that he would be crucified. So perhaps, in preparation for that, Jesus needed to go away for a while, to go to a place where there would be no expectations on him, where he could be anonymous, without any demands on him and he could spend a while preparing for the horrors that were coming to him.

I wonder how the disciples felt going there? They would have been outside their comfort zone amongst the Gentiles; not knowing how to act or behave, probably feeling a bit nervous and agitated.

I had a meeting a few months ago at a Mosque near here. It was a lovely meeting and I was made very welcome. But as I arrived for the meeting, I didn’t know which door to go in, I didn’t know whether or not to take off my shoes, I didn’t know whether to shake hands with the women in there, I didn’t understand the culture at all - just as many people don’t know the culture of St. Andrew’s when they come here for the first time: and so we simply can’t expect people to know, for their first few visits here where to sit, which book to use, when to sit, when to stand, what to do at the Communion rail or during the Peace. The Church may be an alien culture to them, as the Mosque was to me - and we need to be sensitive to that.

So, the disciples in this story were feeling nervous and disorientated - and then things get more difficult for them, as we read in verse 22: “A Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting…” This is getting worse and worse for them…They are in a foreign place, outside of their comfort zone and a woman comes up to them and starts shouting: a Gentile woman shouting at Jewish men: what on earth is going on here? All the social rules are being broken here and everyone – disciples, Jesus and woman – are outside of their own comfort zones.

And what is Jesus’ response? Nothing – absolutely nothing…verse 23: “But he did not answer her at all”. How could Jesus appear so indifferent to the genuine anguish of another human being? We don’t know. The text tells us absolutely nothing to justify or explain why Jesus remains as passive as he does.

But we do know what was going on in the heads of his disciples. They took Jesus’ silence to mean that he wasn’t interested in this foreigner. Because Jesus didn’t immediately respond, they though that they could just treat this foreigner with disdain. In verse 23 it says, “And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us’.” They didn’t want to interact with this woman from a different religion. They didn’t want to interact with this woman whose accent was different. They didn’t want to interact with this woman whose cultural values were different from theirs. “Send her away. We don’t want to listen to this foreigner.”

And how we wish that, in this moment, Jesus had corrected them. We want Jesus to say, “No, everyone is equally welcome. I don’t care if people are Jew or Gentile – all are to be equally respected as children of God” We want Jesus to condemn the racist, xenophobic behaviour of his disciples. But he doesn’t. It seems, at first glance of verse 24, that he holds the same views as the disciples, because he simply says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”.

Is Jesus being racist here too? Is he holding to some form of Jewish Supremacy?

No, I don’t think so – because if he did hold those views, he would have done what the disciples wanted and sent the woman away. What he does instead, is to open a dialogue with the woman through which everyone present can learn spiritual lessons.

In verse 25, the woman comes to Jesus, and offers up a simple request: “Lord, help me”. There is such agony in her request, such pain, she has no more words to say. And what we want here is for Jesus to pick her up and hold her and respond out of deep compassion to immediately give her what she needs. But he doesn’t seem to do that. Instead, it seems like he just rubs her face in the dirt and humiliates her further in front of his friends, verse 26: “He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs’.”

It is a seemingly cruel response, a seemingly humiliating reply; not even to address her pain but to suggest that she is somehow less than human - no better than a dog searching for scraps from the table. What does Jesus think he is doing?

And the woman isn’t prepared to give up on this one. She throws Jesus’ words right back in his face in verse 27: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table’.” She is saying, surely there is enough grace and compassion to go round? Does God run out of compassion once it has been shown to the Jews? Is there a limit to God’s kindness? Surely that can’t be right!

The woman is challenging Jesus’ expression of the nature of God here. This foreign woman from a foreign culture knows that the abundance of God cannot be contained or fenced in. This woman from a different faith knows there is more than enough grace to go round…

And it is only at this point, when the woman from a different faith has challenged Jesus that he shows the compassion and kindness that we expect from him. Jesus responds in verse 28, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!”

“Woman, great is your faith!”, says Jesus. She is from a different religion, she is from a different culture and yet Jesus recognises that her faith is great. How challenging is that for us as Christians…to read a passage where Jesus commends the faith of a woman from a different religion? What does that mean for us in this diverse, multi-cultural society in which we now live?

This woman who Jesus encounters doesn’t want to become a follower of Jesus. She doesn’t want to change her religion. She doesn’t want to abandon her culture: why should she? And Jesus never asks that of her. Instead, she remains within her culture, remains within her own faith and Jesus reaches out to her exactly where she is and meets her spiritual needs right there. He doesn’t try to convert her to his faith. Instead, he honours her faith and heals her within that.

Now, there’s a whole lot of issues arising from this with regard to honouring the other faith groups that make up Enfield and London: Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus and others. This passage raises all sorts of questions for us about what it means for us to be a Mission-Shaped Church in a multicultural society and we do need to think about those issues over the coming years. But there is a more general principle that we can draw out of this passage for today, which is simply this:

The boundaries of the Church are much broader than we might think they are.

The Church does not contain people who only look like us, behave like us, worship like us, express faith like us. We are a part of the Church – but we do not represent the sum total of the Church. The Church is much bigger and broader and inclusive than we could ever imagine.

And that has radical implications for us at St. Andrew’s, of course, in how we learn to accept and embrace those who are different or have different ideas. The temptation for us is to expect others to come and join us but join us on our terms, not theirs…We want new people in church, we want people to become Christians, and we will offer the hand of friendship and welcome to them. But ultimately, we want them to join us and become one of us and to play by our rules.

Isn’t that the story of the Christian church throughout history? You are welcome to join: but here are the rules of belief, and the rules of behaviour. The church throughout history, throughout the world, has too often behaved like a club with membership rules and many local churches operate like a clique where people are expected to conform in order to belong.

But that is the exact opposite of what Jesus is doing in this story. In this story, Jesus reaches out and meets the woman in her culture. He doesn’t ask her to join the club, he doesn’t set any provisos for the welcome, he just accepts her as she is, shows compassion and grace and allows her to continue in her own cultural way of being.

But more than that, it appears that Jesus and the disciples are open to learning from this woman from another culture. They don’t just tolerate the difference - they actively engage with it, are prepared to be challenged by it and to allow themselves to grow through this cross-cultural interaction.

Perhaps that is part of the mentality of a truly Mission-Shaped Church; that rather than expecting others to join us exclusively on our terms, instead, we are prepared to learn from others and enlarge our own vision of mission and ministry as a result of engagement with others who are different from ourselves or have different expectations of what church should be. Ultimately, a Mission-Shaped Church stands against the idea of Church as a club to be joined and lives by the ideal that we have something to learn from others and that, as we truly engage with others, so we will be stretched, so we will grow in the faith, so our church will grow, and so we will become more Christlike.

A Mission-Shaped Church does not put boundaries around itself. Instead, it is prepared to dismantle the boundaries, to get rid of the idea of ‘Us and Them’, and proactively choose to learn from others with different ideas so that we can grow together as the people of God - with all our differences, with all our different expectations of God and Church.

So we end with the very question that we began with: why did Matthew include this story in his Gospel?

Perhaps he wanted us to learn the very simple truth that those we consider to be ‘outsiders’ can teach us about God. Perhaps he wants us to realise that we have more to learn from others than we have to teach them. And so Matthew includes this story because he wants us to follow the example of Jesus and embrace outsiders, both so that we can show God’s love to them as well as learn from them.

There is a true dialogue as new people join us in the St. Andrew’s family and there is a true dialogue as we engage with people who will never join us. Society is enriched by the conversation. Our faith is enriched by the conversation.

If we want to be a truly Mission-Shaped Church, we mustn’t fear the Other, we mustn’t spurn the ‘Outsider’. Instead, we talk, we embrace, we respect, we show kindness, and we have a willingness to listen and learn. If we take this approach to being a Mission-Shaped Church, I believe that we will grow in ways that we never previously thought possible. And as we do that, God will take us into a new and exciting future at St. Andrew’s.