



**Isaiah 56.1,6-8**  
**Matthew 15.21-28**  
**16<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

## **Crossing Boundaries**

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**ALL AGE TALK: *Sitting in the wrong part of the bus***

On December 1<sup>st</sup> 1955 she refused to give up her seat on the bus.

Rosa Parks was already sitting at the back end of the bus, in the coloured section and when the bus became full the driver commanded her to give up her seat to a white passenger. She refused and the rest is history.

After being shown such injustice the black community of Montgomery, Alabama, boycotted the bus company for a whole year. Rosa Parks teamed up with a new minister in town, The Revd Martin Luther King, and eventually she became known as the Mother of the Modern Civil Rights Movement.

Rosa Parks wanted to keep her seat on the bus, she wanted to be treated with respect and to participate in her community's life as a full human being.

She reminds me of one of my favourite bible characters whose story is told in Sunday's gospel reading. We don't know her name, but we do know she met Jesus. She'd heard so much about him that when he passed through her town she asked for his help, she longed for him to bless her daughter with healing and wholeness. But, well, it was like she was sitting in the wrong end of the bus. She was a foreigner, so at first it looked as if Jesus and his disciples thought a blessing could not be given to her.

This Canaanite woman in today's story just didn't give up, she even seems to remind Jesus that he had people from her nation in his family tree. It's as if she actually helps Jesus re-assess the Kingdom of God, this way of living with love and justice as a message without boundaries, open to all as our expression of one humanity under God.

Just like Rosa Parks, the nameless woman in today's gospel helps us see the world differently. It's a process; and because it involves people changing their minds it can sometimes take a long time, yet it's so worthwhile. It's an important part of our faith, to look at our world and lives and continue to ask the question: in the light of God's Kingdom, God's way of love and justice, is this how we should live?

In the end Jesus blesses the Canaanite women's daughter with his healing and wholeness.

And in the end, in 2005, when Rosa Parks died, President Bush ordered that every American flag be lowered to half-mast for a woman Time Magazine described as one the 20 most influential people of the last century.

And, in a highly symbolic gesture, from the day of her death to the day of her funeral, the Montgomery Bus Company ordered that every bus in the city reserve the first two seats and drape them with black ribbons – in memory of a woman whose greatest wish was simply to be treated with dignity and have the freedom to sit in any seat of her choosing.

We thank God for all who teach us what it means to live with the best characteristics of our humanity.

### SERMON: **Crossing Boundaries**

Minister: For the Word of God is scripture

**All: For the Word of God among us**

Minister: For the Word of God within us

**All: Thanks be to God. Amen**

There is a sense of movement in this morning's gospel reading and it's not just physical.

Jesus and his disciples are moving through new territory just outside of Israel's borders. They are travelling through Tyre and Sidon and a one-

woman welcoming committee greets them. This Canaanite had obviously heard much of this Jesus and that, in itself, is worth pondering. Just how, in a day and age without mass media, the reputation of Jesus seemed to go ahead of him via the Bush Telegraph. Well, here he is and this woman, who has an unwell daughter, greets him, already showing signs of faith and trust.

Yet at this moment there is a sharp intake of breath. The disciples, or perhaps in this account it might be more appropriate to call them Bouncers, want their master to have nothing to do with a foreigner.

What ensues has been called something of a *Choral Contest*. The woman says: *Lord have mercy* as the Bouncer Disciples, who so love their boundaries at this point, chant back to Jesus: *Send her away*. In Greek those phrases: *Lord have mercy* and *Send her away* sound very similar yet couldn't mean anything more different.

And at this moment it looks as if the disciples are winning because Jesus (and we find this hard to read I think), basically defines this woman as a 'dog'.

In that first century world there is some evidence that whilst Romans and Greeks might have treated dogs as pets, that was something never found in Jewish culture. So, to call this woman a dog is to dismiss her, even insult her.

Matthew has Jesus say he'd come to give bread to the children; coded language meaning he saw his mission at this moment as primarily, even exclusively, to the nation of Israel. So, no, despite her heartfelt appeals and signs of faith, he couldn't help her.

Thank God the story doesn't end there. And I don't think Matthew ever intended, even for a millisecond, to leave it there. Because for him this was always a story about the way faith and belief can progress and mature. It's a story just as much about the process of believing as about what we believe in.

So, as the momentum builds in today's narrative the *In Take of Breath Moment* is followed by the *Think Again Moment*.

This encounter that Jesus had with this wonderful women – I say again, one of my favourite bible characters, seems to change him. It's not comfortable; indeed, it's disconcerting to read his initial response to her. Yet it was a moment of change, a moment to re-assess, a moment to see a broader horizon. And Jesus, and surely this is Matthew's intention in telling us the story, Jesus is wise enough to take this moment.

Matthew writes his gospel primarily for a Jewish readership. He takes, as does Luke, many many stories from the first gospel ever written, the Gospel of Mark. And Mark has this story too. In Mark's gospel the story is more brutal. Matthew goes at a slower pace, he wants to take his Jewish readership with him because he wants to convince them bit by bit, slowly but surely, that God's love and God's message is truly international and without boundaries. He hints at that in the birth story with the visit of the Wise Men, foreign worshippers at the manger. But he has to develop that as he reworks Mark's stories, and this is one such moment. So, come the end of his gospel he's able to write about the Great Commission of Jesus sending the disciples into ALL the world, to all nations, to share God's love and light.

But that has been a process. A process of changed thinking, of getting rid of boundaries and embracing a wider vision and a broader horizon. No story is more important in that process than today's.

The Canaanite Woman calls Jesus the *Son of David* and that title says a lot.

Matthew is big on genealogy, just read his opening chapters of who begets who! And in the genealogy of King David, which Jesus owns as his birth right, there are foreign, non-Jewish women listed. Jesus' kinsfolk included Ruth, Tamar and Rahab.

This might well have been the Canaanite Woman's way of challenging Jesus. It's as if she is saying: *We are the same, we are kin, we too are family.*

And then she pleads: *Just give me the crumbs that fall from your table, like a dog I'll eat the scraps.*

She persisted, and persistence and faith make a powerful pair. And she invokes a common humanity as a bond between them. And this affirms all that Matthew has had Jesus say in the verses we didn't read before this story; all about defining a person not by what they eat but how they think and what they say.

It's so significant that it's this so called 'outsider' who seems to have a much better insight into Jesus' identity than Jesus' disciples. She becomes a catalyst for change and a really important person in this maturing process.

We should, I think, never be worried or ashamed about changing our minds when it comes to faith. Our discipleship lasts a lifetime so, pray God, there will be many days when new dawns and fresh insights come our way. Faith becomes alive when it looks at the world with honesty, it can shrivel up if it does no more than pedal the traditions of yesterday.

And so it seems to come to Jesus, after the Intake of Breath Moment, followed by the Think Again Moment, this story ends with a Eureka Moment; there's a change of heart.

It's sometimes said that our passage today should be read from its end, not its beginning. At the beginning it is discriminatory. At its end it affirms the despised. Seen from its end it becomes a celebration of inclusivity and that's Matthew's goal.

Of course, it is a risky story because this Eureka moment took time in coming. We get there, but only at the expense of Jesus' past.

This is the human Jesus that we so often want to soften. This is the Jesus who was raised with the usual prejudices and assumptions of the day. At one level the humanity of Jesus scares us. His struggles become too familiar and we'd rather be comforted by a super-hero Jesus with that Away in a Manger divinity that states: *the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes* – which must surely be a sort of blasphemy against his Incarnation.

We might have to battle with this thought, it might challenge us, but surely we cannot walk away from it: Jesus changes his mind in today's passage and seems to appreciate a new depth to the idea we call God's Kingdom because this wonderful woman stood up to him and helped him see things differently.

Yet isn't that what being truly human, yet touched with the image of God, is all about? We respond to love. We are changed when we meet with truth. We sing a new song when justice dwells in our hearts.

This isn't a Jesus to be ashamed of but one to be thankful for: teaching us what it means to embrace new ideas and discover the deepest truths of our shared humanity. The Jesus who very publicly shows us what it is to have the humility to change a viewpoint and the joy to then cross a boundary in a new spirit of friendship.

If we are honest this process is neither new nor unfamiliar to us.

In the Church we too have walked this pathway. There have been boundaries we needed to cross.

We needed to switch from supporting slavery to working for its abolition.

We needed to cross out the lines of hymns which talked of: *The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate.*

We needed to embrace the gifting and calling of women to ordination rather than cling to the centuries old tradition that only men could lead and preach in The Church.

The process continues as we engage in dialogues about race, sexuality, eco-sustainability and our relationship with the Non Developing World.

Jesus teaches us it is both human and godly to change our mind in the name of love when we encounter truth.

Thank God for the change makers who teach us as better way of being human. Thank God for Rosa Parks and the Canaanite Woman.

May it be so in the name of Jesus, who listened the heart's cry of another, and bravely choose the way of love instead of prejudice. Amen

*Ian Green Amersham: 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020*