



Revd Ro's Reflection on Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Proper 15

Year A

Romans 11.1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15.10-28

The gospel reading begins, 'Then he called the crowd to him.' It is always good to know what happens prior to a reading and, in this case, to know what the 'Then' refers to. After the disciples crossed the lake, we are told in Matthew 14.35, 'the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.' So Jesus is continuing his healing ministry and it appears that wherever he went crowds followed him. Jesus' fame is spreading. The corollary of that is that the Jewish leaders and the Pharisees, those who seek to control the people, view him as a real threat. Hence they are always trying to criticise him or trap him for 'breaking the law'. That is just what happens at the beginning of chapter 15

² 'Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.'

We know that there were many laws regarding food and cleanliness that the Jewish people were required to obey. Jesus immediately turns the tables on them by saying that by their behaviour on a certain point they are not obeying the commandment of God given to Moses, 'Honour your father and your mother.' This is 15.3. Jesus quotes Isaiah 29.33

'You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

"This people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines." '

It is always good to examine an extract in its context. This is why the gospel reading this week begins with Jesus forcefully explaining that it is not what you eat that is important but how you behave. It is

cleverly done too because he says it is what comes out of your mouth that matters. In other words what you say and do, then he quotes all sorts of sins.

When the disciples tell him that the Pharisees have taken offence at what he said, Jesus is very forthright. He actually says that these people are, 'blind guides of the blind.' The religious leaders should be guiding the people by setting an example, by showing the way of God, actually they are doing the opposite and the law is becoming a yoke to the people, little more than a method of control. They are using laws created by people, not by God, to control them, 'teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

It is Jesus' new way that is the guide for them now. It is behaviour that matters not lip service or slavishly following rules, doing what is expected. No, it is what is in your heart that matters. That is true of every generation. Behaviour matters, living in God's way, not thinking of yourself or saying if we obey traditions we are okay. It is actually a very profound passage and something that every Christian needs to think about, we can never be complacent about our behaviour. We must try to follow Jesus' way. Worse still of course is what the Pharisees are doing saying 'this is God's way' when really it is theirs. We are all fallible but the point is we have to try our best to live as Jesus would want us to.

The story that follows is the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter. I am quite sure that it is juxtaposed with the reference to the Pharisees' behaviour purposely. This story appears in Mark but here she is referred to as the Syrophenician woman. Jesus has now travelled to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

The Pharisees are the religious teachers, the people who thought they had got it right with God. This is a woman and a foreigner. Jews would pray, 'Thank you Lord that you have not made me a slave, a Gentile or a woman.' This woman, fulfilling two of these categories, would certainly be considered of little account by the Pharisees. Yet she came to the young rabbi, no doubt having heard stories of the wonders he performed. She is not afraid and shouts after him,

'Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon.'

Whether this was possession or some illness we don't know but the central point is the woman's faith. Notice she refers to Jesus as, 'Lord, and Son of David,' her motivation is love for her daughter. She is met with a round rebuff. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

Of course that was Jesus' primary mission, to bring the Good News to the Jews and yet beyond this we hear the echoes of Simeon's prophecy, 'To be a light to lighten the Gentiles.'

Anyone who is a mother, or who has loved someone dearly knows you would do anything to help them. Her child is sick. It means everything to her to get a cure. A little rebuff is negligible compared to that. So she comes in love, huge love, for her child and in faith to the only man who can help.

By this time she calls him 'Lord' and worships him. If you notice Jesus establishes some kind of relationship with those he heals. She is no longer faceless. The relationship has changed. She sees something wonderful in Jesus and her faith in him is complete. He sees something more in her as she passes the faith test. In that meeting of eyes he searches her soul and does not find her wanting. It is in stark contrast to the Pharisees who have been carping and arguing about Jesus not obeying the letter of the law.

'Woman great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.'

We are told, 'at that moment her daughter was healed instantly.' She does not even ask Jesus to come with her. It reminds us of Matthew 8.8 the story of the centurion's servant, 'Only speak the

word, and my servant will be healed.' Of course we echo this in our communion service, 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. Only say the word and I shall be healed.'

Jesus is the incarnate God. God loves all equally; there is no distinction between people regardless of status, gender, or nationality. We are his people. In a world torn by prejudice and injustice we know that Jesus' gospel is a gospel of love and care for all God's people.

Would we look with the eyes of faith as the woman did? Do we in the tough times have the trust to depend on God? That is what Jesus is offering us. His promise is that he is always with us and also that when we fail he forgives us if we try to walk in his way.

The short reading from Romans begins at 11.1 but continues at verse 29, it part of a much longer passage whose argument culminates in the final sentences. It is very useful to read the passage in its entirety to understand Paul's argument.

Today's passage links with the last two extracts we have looked at. Paul was deeply saddened because the vast majority of his own people, the Jews, had not recognised Jesus as their long awaited Messiah.

God's purposes are a mystery, as Paul makes clear in the passage which comes immediately after this reading.

³³ 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!'

³⁴ 'For who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counsellor?'

³⁵ 'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?'

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever. Amen.'

Paul tries to make sense of the fact that most Jews did not accept Jesus. Paul says in verse 13; 'Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. In as much then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles.'

He makes it very clear to them at the start that he is 'an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin,' and follows most importantly with the statement that God has not and will never reject his chosen people, the Jews. What in fact has happened, because the majority of the Jews have not accepted Jesus' message, is that the word is to be taken to the Gentiles, they have their opportunity now. In the passage beginning at verse 3 Paul tells them they are not to feel superior to the Jews in any way. He makes it clear that the Jews are God's covenant people. He compares this to an olive tree; the root is deeply embedded in the people of Israel. The branches are those who have accepted Jesus as the Christ. The Gentiles who believe and turn to him are like grafts implanted into the tree but they are never to forget their roots or to feel themselves superior or inferior, it is a powerful image.

'Remember that it is not you that supports the root, but the root that supports you.'

The Jews are God's covenant people, throughout their history some have turned away, some have disobeyed but never once has God lost his love for them. His covenants and promises to his people the Jews stand forever. He is longing for them to turn to Jesus but he will never abandon them. This is Paul's point at verse 25;

'So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

'Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.'

²⁷ 'And this is my covenant with them,
when I take away their sins.'

God longs for the Jews to turn to Jesus to recognise him as the promised Messiah and the opportunity is always there for them. God will always call them. Paul looks forward to the day when that will be accomplished. Now the Gentiles have the opportunity to hear of Jesus and accept him as Christ.

¹² 'Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!'

If we think back to the gospel passage we can see the link in that it encapsulates part of what Paul says. The disciples represent those who have turned to Jesus; the Pharisees and scribes, those who reject him, and the Canaanite woman represents the Gentiles who now have the opportunity to hear Jesus' message and turn to him. In the light of the Romans passage we can understand Jesus' initial words to her, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'

Jesus' message was initially for his own people but now all are called, all those who put their faith in Jesus become heirs with Jesus through God's grace. We have the privilege of a close relationship with God whenever we call on him.

'Risen Lord, You know me better than I know myself, speak and help me listen. Call me into your life that I may possess your kingdom. Give me insight to recognise you and value your calling through all my days.' Revd Canon Paul Iles

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