

Trinity 10

Today we heard an elegant coda to the theme and variation of parable and miracle in the last four Sundays' gospels. Today (in Matthew 15) Jesus puts his opponents to the test, pushing back for the first time. With briefest of parables he condemns the elevation of human rules (ritual hand washing before meals) over Godly behaviour, a parable which has entered into our language in a single phrase 'the blind leading the blind', a coruscating description of religious leaders who elevate man-made boundaries over relationship with God.

Jesus' authority is in turn confronted by a far more significant threat to received Jewish boundaries than the lack of ritual hand washing, a confrontation which issues in a healing miracle. The parable, followed directly by this healing which enacts the teaching, shows clearly what I've been talking about for the past two Sundays: the miracles and the parables are two sides of the same gospel coin.

Jesus is approached by an outsider, a gobby Canaanite woman, who is herself aware of her outsider status (notice her self-description as a 'dog'). And, astonishingly, the non-Jewish woman out-teaches the Jewish teacher. This is a unique encounter in the Gospels: Jesus being bested by a non-Jew, and, yet more shockingly to the religious establishment, a woman. Rather than censoring the encounter Matthew presents it as exemplifying the teaching.

Things being seldom what they seem, we could observe at this point the presence of Canaanite and other foreign women in Jesus' own genealogy according to Matthew (including, of course, Solomon's mother Bathsheba). Whether or not Matthew intends us to remember that, behind the telling of this incident hides the outworking of the relative status of Jews and non-Jews in Matthew's church. But that's probably a footnote.

The ultimate test for Jesus is that the woman shows *faith* from beginning to end. With faith she addresses Jesus as both 'Lord' and 'Son of David'; in faith she cries out in what is already, by the time Matthew writes, a liturgical formula – *kyrie eleison*, Lord, have mercy.

The point is very similar to the punchline in the healing of the centurion's servant: 'Not even in Israel have I found such faith'. These Gentiles show a degree of faith which is lacking among Jesus' Jewish contemporaries, foreshadowing the future rejection of the Gospel by many Jewish people and the subsequent turning of the Christian mission to the Gentiles. You may remember that elsewhere Jesus tells those he heals to keep silent (a phenomenon especially emphasized by Mark where it has been called the Messianic Secret). Here, as in the case of the healing of the Gerasene demoniac, there is no command to the woman to keep quiet about the healing miracle: in Gentile territory, it seems, different rules of proclamation apply.

By calling Jesus 'Lord', *Kyrie*, the woman has made a double statement: it is a profession of faith but also a claim to approach insider space. Jews didn't allow dogs in the house. Gentiles did. When Jesus speaks of throwing food to the dogs, his words imply throwing it out the door. When the woman, talking back, refers to eating crumbs from the table, she is insisting that even the dogs are allowed in. We may hear an echo of 'For my house shall be called a house of prayer *for all peoples*': she reminds Jesus of the same principle on which he will act in 'cleansing' the temple. But more importantly for her than winning an argument, the woman's daughter is healed.

You may or not believe in the supernatural character of these healings and other events: I have no trouble in doing so. But even if you don't so believe, in the gospels they serve as parables, showing what God is like, not because they are miraculous but because of the relationships they create, or transcend.

On home ground many of the healing miracles are instances of Jesus crossing a boundary or ignoring a taboo. Elsewhere, for example, the healing of the woman with a haemorrhage and the raising of Jairus' daughter cross several obvious red lines for an observant Jew (we are never left in any doubt Jesus is an observant Jew). Contact with women, with blood and with dead bodies are all high on the list of don'ts for him, yet these and other similar encounters are embraced by him without hesitation.

This is a further key to the teaching. Jesus upholds the Law, but he doesn't uphold man-made exclusivist regulations which get in the way of relationships, with God and with others, to build up the Kingdom. As always there's a balance: he has no doubt, as S Paul also insists, that the good news is to be offered first to the Jewish people as part of their being chosen, their election. This 'chosenness' can sound like election to a club, but it is the opposite. It is a vocation to show forth the true God *to the whole world*. Most Jews have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah. Nevertheless, as Paul says, their election stands: they remain God's first-born children, and to be respected by Christians as such, in a sort of imperfect communion with barriers on both sides, which still need to be broken down. Perhaps 'breaking' is the wrong verb: he looks at barriers between people and asks how, conscientiously, they can be minimized, bypassed or set aside as no longer fit for purpose.

All three readings today are about radical inclusion in the face of bigotry and misunderstanding, in which even the Son of God is himself apparently convicted of bigotry and changes his mind. If Jesus had to challenge his own ideas about inclusion we should not be surprised that arguments about it still haunt so much human behaviour; even, sadly, ecclesiastical behaviour. These healing miracles remind us that human barriers, between groups of people and between us and God, are to be interrogated, and, sometimes, set aside.