

Service for Private or Personal Use for 5th September

Read Isaiah 35:4-7, with its thrilling description of a world made whole when it is under the reign of God and his Messiah. Pause and pray before you continue....

Hymn 79 (H&P 439) *[I'll praise my maker, while I've breath](#)*

This hymn is based on Psalm 146, which is set for today. Notice how the psalm holds out hope for the sufferers, the lonely and the vulnerable.

Prayer

Our gracious God and Father, you have given us breath and you have given us voices with which to praise you. You have set us in a beautiful creation, to raise our thoughts towards you and your glory. In your word, and in the ministry of Jesus, you have given us a vision of how you will remake your world, as a more harmonious place, more caring, more supportive. In every glimpse of beauty we see a hint of that promise. In every kind act and every generous response to need you remind us of how the world should be. Whenever the artificial divisions of race and nationality, of class and gender, of status and education are set aside in the service of your kingdom we come a little closer to your heart. We find your visiting card.

And when we see such things we are ashamed to recognize how often we have failed to live like that. We have remained where we were comfortable, in the company that never challenged us. We avoided the situations that might put demands on our time or our compassion or our money. We have been quick to condemn and to blame, but held back from helping. We have preserved the divisions and aggravated the hurts. In the greatness of your mercy, cleanse us from those sins; and by your Spirit's strengthening, guide us in paths of righteousness.

Restore to us the wonder of your gospel, of how the Lord of glory – our Saviour Jesus Christ – laid aside every privilege and honour that he shared with you; how he came among us in such humility, taking the form of a servant. Hold before us all the wisdom of his words, all the compassion of his works and all the warmth of his welcome to sinners who repent. Plant them deep within us, we pray. And as once he was lifted up on a cross to bear the sin of the world, may we know that – through his death and resurrection – our sins are forgiven and new life begins.

We ask in faith, and we ask in love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Bible Readings

[James 2:1-17](#) *The verses at the end of chapter 1 speak about the nature of true/real religion, and in these verses James gives practical examples.*

[Mark 7:24-37](#) *At the beginning of the chapter Jesus has been in controversy with Pharisees about the way in which they obsess about tiny details of the Law, but make excuses to avoid its major demands – religion, but no reality.*

Reflection

The book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament says that “There is nothing new under the sun,” and from experience we are inclined to agree. That is certainly the case where human nature is concerned. The same old weaknesses and failings crop up in every age. Whether it is greed or self-centredness, whether it is the desire to exploit and dominate others and impose our will on them; the same old sins return again and again.

James identifies several ways in which prejudice infects us. Honesty compels us to accept his description as painfully close to the mark. When a visitor arrives at our church, don't we make a quick assessment of them? Are they smart, and deserving of attention; or are they a bit scruffy and short on hygiene, an embarrassment to be hidden away? Are they 'our sort of people'? And, yes: colour; racial prejudice is still found in many churches. How we act or speak when we don't stop to think reveals our real sense of values, our way of ranking who is important. It troubles me when we hold up 'celebrities' who claim to be Christians, as if their endorsement of the faith somehow makes it more credible. Paul reminded the Corinthians that not many of them were wise or powerful or of noble birth; their dignity and worth lay in God's love for them, and Christ's death for them.

People often read the story of Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman as if he had fallen into this prejudice trap; that there was a flaw even in his character. Had he also given in to the centuries- old hostility between Jews and Gentiles? Did he think that God's blessings were exclusively for Jews? Did he really intend to compare her to a dog, as many Jews would have done? (Put the word 'bitch' in the question, and you can see how offensive it was.)

But the story can be – and *should* be – read differently. We don't know the tone of voice in which he spoke: was it hostile, or was it encouraging? Was there a twinkle in his eye, which told her that he, at least, did not share those stereotype prejudices? Was he inviting her to meet him where those prejudices become irrelevant? Was he opening a door for her to show the depth and reality of her faith? *And was he challenging his disciples, as they listen and watch, to set aside their prejudices?*

She had displayed several special qualities already. Gentiles normally avoided Jews, but she had come to him. It was a risky business for a woman to speak to a man in public, but she had done so. To approach him with this request meant abandoning her old failed religion, and putting all her confidence in Jesus. By doing this in public, where her neighbours could see and hear and judge, she was exposing herself to great risks. Hers was faith, and it was best revealed by being challenged. She did not lose hope at the first refusal. (How many people say a brief prayer, and then give up because they didn't get what they wanted?)

The account in Matthew 15 is slightly fuller. There, Jesus commends her faith: "Woman, great is your faith!" He doesn't admire her sharp wit, or her clever argument, or her intense pleading, or even her obvious loving concern for her daughter. Faith. "Without *faith* it is impossible to please God," wrote the letter to the Hebrews. She trusted the power, and the compassion, and the willingness of Jesus; and she was not disappointed. How different she is from the slot-machine Christians, the people who imagine that they just pop a little prayer in, and will immediately get whatever it was they wanted. And if they don't get it immediately they blame God for letting them down. That is not faith, but superstition; and this woman rebukes us for it!

Last week we read at the beginning of this chapter of Mark about the empty reliance on old rituals and hair-splitting obedience to the small-print, while the more serious issues of God's good intention for humanity was ignored. This woman has grasped what the experts had missed.

Since this story has been preserved by two gospel writers I sometimes wonder if mother and daughter became part of the infant church. Surely they were known within the Church, where already Jews and Gentiles were becoming one in Christ. When their story was told in church, did they nudge each other, exchange knowing looks, and glow with quiet pride: "This is how we met Jesus." This is how the barriers of prejudice came crashing down – and they would today if we did not set limits on where the love of God can reach.

A glance at the other story in the gospel reading prompts the questions: Are my ears open to listen to Jesus (v35)? Do I speak plainly about him (v35)? Do other people see enough of Jesus in me, that they should say, "Jesus has done all things well." (v37) – Look what Jesus has done in that life!

Hymn 255 (H&P 139) [*The kingdom of God is justice and joy*](#)

Prayers of Intercession

- What examples of prejudice have come to mind during these last few minutes? They may be things you have experienced or observed around you. They may, sadly, have happened in the life of the church. Whether you observed them, or were a victim, or were a guilty party, **pray** that the healing and reconciling love of Jesus will transform the people involved and the situations you remember.
- How can the church that you know best become a model of reconciliation and a sign of hope? **Pray** that you and your congregation may be fired with enthusiasm to achieve this.
- What stories in the news this week have particularly struck you? They may have been stories of suffering (such as the plight of refugees in Afghanistan, or victims of the earthquake in Haiti), or they may have been stories that inspire (such as competitors in the Paralympics).* **Pray** that God's help may be given to those who suffer, and that inspiring stories may bring encouragement.
- Where do situations seem impossible? Where does it look as if every human effort and all human wisdom are unable to meet the challenge? **Pray** that God's greater power and his deeper wisdom may prevail, where human skill has failed.
- Today is the first Sunday of the new Methodist year. Many ministers have moved to fresh appointments, and many churches are welcoming a new minister – or perhaps are facing the difficulty of a shortage of ministers. **Pray** for ministers and circuits and congregations as this new year begins. May all seek God's grace, which is sufficient for every situation. May all set their sights on God's kingdom and glory. May all hold out the word of life as it is known in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

O Lord our God, as you have told us "in all things, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God," so we bring our prayers for the blessing of others and the glory of your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

**This service was prepared Friday 27th August, and other stories may be prominent in the news by 5th September.*

The Lord's Prayer – using whichever form of words you find most helpful

Hymn 608 (H&P 753) [All praise to our redeeming Lord, who joins us by his grace](#)

Remembering that you are sharing this service with many others, say aloud:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.

Amen.

(and “all” includes the ones I don’t get on with, as well as my friends!)