

<b>Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> August 2017</b> <b>St Paul's, Komga</b> <b>9 a.m.</b>		<b>20<sup>th</sup> Sunday – Pentecost 11 - Year A</b> <b>THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION</b> <b>SUNDAY</b>	
Gen 45:1-15	Ps 133	Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32	
		Matthew 15:21-28	
<b>PEOPLE OF HOPE</b>			

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’  
And her daughter was healed instantly.” (Matt 15:28)

## **INTRODUCTION & GREETINGS**

Greetings to Revd Pumza Tiso and your family; churchwardens and PCC of St Paul's Komga; all the people of God gathered here this morning – greetings to you all, from the Cathedral and the wider diocese, in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

I am sorry that Revd Claire could not be with us as well, as she is preaching at the Cathedral this morning; she sends her love.

Thank you very much for your invitation to me to be with you this morning. Your churchwardens wrote to me a while back about the possibility of me visiting you; Revd Pumza extended a formal invitation; so here I am.

It is good to be here!

It is always quite exciting and also daunting to visit a church for the first time, and to preach – because you and I are new to one another; I approach you as brothers and sisters in Christ, but also as strangers; I have not sat down with any of you over a cup of tea to engage, to hear you.

Preaching is for me always contextual – it makes sense and comes to life when the word of God as we read it and preach it is in dialogue with our lives, with your life and mine, with the life of this community of faith. I find it difficult to simply walk in and

pronounce from on high, without also discerning what God is doing amongst you, what the Spirit is saying to you all, how the Lord has been present in your life together over the past while.

So the best place for us to start is to open the scriptures together, to seek to understand them, to listen for the word of God to us, to you and me. My sermon title: **PEOPLE OF HOPE.**

## **OUR READINGS**

We are in the “green” season, the Sundays after Pentecost. The lectionary – the set of readings that the church gives us, Sunday by Sunday – gives us three quite distinct passages of scripture for us to chew over today – four, if we include the psalm. They are not intended to be linked or for there to be a common theme. Rather, it is intended that we follow three different tracks – themes and stories in the Old Testament; a series of readings from the letters or epistles; and the gospel.

**Genesis 45:1-15** is part of the great story of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We read a piece of it, the story of Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob... Joseph the dreamer...betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery in Egypt... he has now risen to be ruler of all Egypt... the 7 years of plenty, the 7 years of famine... and it is this famine that has driven his brothers, without them realising it, to seek his help so that they might live. Our reading is the moment of unveiling, of revelation... it all comes out... the shame and secrets of years are revealed...

We reflect on God at work through this family, dysfunctional, broken, riven with rivalry and jealousy, conflict, yet the family of the covenant, the beginnings of God’s chosen people...God’s grace through them, in spite of their failures...

**Ps 133** “Behold how good and how lovely it is: when brothers live together in unity. It is fragrant as oil upon the head that runs down over the beard... It is like the dew that falls upon the hill of Zion...”

**Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32** Paul is outlining the place and role of Israel – not the modern state of Israel, but the ancient people, the Jews – as the chosen people of God in the salvation of the Gentiles.

**Matthew 15:21-28** the story of the Canaanite woman, the foreigner, who came to Jesus for help, and his initially strange, off-hand response.... a difficult passage... picture of exclusion...rejection... a strange picture of Jesus...

It is a significant passage: “it foreshadows the going out of the gospel to the whole world; it shows us the beginning of the end of all the barriers.”<sup>1</sup>

Matthew’s gospel: written for a largely Jewish Christian community and audience. Jesus is shown to fulfil the Jewish law, the OT prophecies; he is the teacher in the line of Moses; he is the Jewish Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham. Matthew is the gospel, the good news, for Jews and Jewish Christians.

But by the end of Matthew’s gospel, the risen Christ is saying to his disciples, “Go ... and make disciples of all nations...” (Matt 28:19). The good news of God’s love in Jesus is now for all people, not only for the Jews. What happens to bring about this shift and highly significant change?

Our gospel reading for today is part of that shift.

Jesus travels away from Galilee and the lakeside (15:21 – the place of healing, debate and conflict with Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem) into the territories of Tyre and Sidon – not simply two random towns, but two cities with evil reputations (cf Ezekiel 28). They represent the gentile nations that have turned against God.

A woman comes to ask help for her possessed daughter.

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, W. 1975. *Matthew*, 120.

She is not a Jew. She is from the area of Tyre and Sidon; and even worse, she is a Canaanite – from the land/area of Canaan – she belongs to a group from whom Israel is supposed to remain separate. They are outside the chosen people of God. (In Mark’s gospel, she is the Syrophenician woman – Mark 7:26).

She pleads with Jesus – shouting “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” (v 22)

She keeps on shouting after him, bothering him...

Jesus is reluctant to help – he is obedient to the biblical commandment to stay separate from the Canaanites – “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (v 24).

But she is desperate. She pleads for help. She humbles herself before Jesus’ objections. She kneels before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” (v. 27).

His answer is astonishing. He refuses to help her. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (v 26) – a very blunt parable - which compares the Gentiles to dogs in contrast to Israel as God’s children (v. 25-26).

Imagine if that comment had gone out on social media!

But her response overwhelms Jesus: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” (v 27). She defeats Jesus in debate, the only time this happens in the gospel.

The church has taken the woman’s words and adapted them – we use them in the Prayer of Humble Access before receiving Communion: “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989.* 127 #81

She has so robust a faith – she is so determined - that she is praised by Jesus: “ ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.” (v 28)

**This gospel story shows...**

## **1. Changing vision for ministry**

Jesus’ reluctant response contradicts the usual picture of a universally merciful Jesus. He appears to have a limited vision for his ministry.

Jesus is (initially) the Messiah for the Jews only. But there are two occasions in Matthew’s gospel where he ministers to gentiles – Matt 8:5-13, the healing of the centurion’s servant; the daughter of the Canaanite woman. In both cases, it is the faith and determination of the supplicant (the centurion, the mother) that brings healing, twists Jesus’ arm...and changes the vision for ministry.

Picture: healing, God’s grace...making the circle wider...

Contrast with e.g. John 3:16 “God so loved the world...” the universal embrace of God...

By the end of Matthew’s Gospel, the command to the disciples is to go to all nations (28:16-20). The vision for ministry has quite fundamentally changed from its early beginnings.

What is our vision for witness? For ministry? Can we make the circle wider? Extend our vision? Broaden our scope? Look more widely?

## **2. The uncomfortable voice, the awkward encounter**

We see Jesus being shaken and his understanding of his vocation challenged and disturbed! Both the woman, and Jesus, are changed by this encounter.

But it was not a comfortable voice to hear! For Jesus, it was the voice of a woman; a stranger, a foreigner; someone from outside the chosen people, outside the community of faith. Indeed, both the woman and Jesus are changed and shaken up in this encounter.

What are the voices that disturb us? Make us uncomfortable? Shake up our assumptions? Question us?

### **3. Crossing the boundaries**

For both the woman and Jesus, this ministry encounter meant crossing the boundaries: the boundaries of gender, the boundaries of race, the boundaries of custom. Yet they were brought together by her cry, her need: “Lord, help me. Help my daughter. Minister to me. Save me.” And by her determination – her robust faith: I will not let you go unless you bless me. Please.

We are invited to see the love of God in the other, across the boundaries, in the discomfort; to reach across divides of race and culture to receive the love and grace of God.

#### **And so...**

We come to the Lord, like that woman, shouting, crying out to be heard....an invitation to persevere in our prayers, in our asking. We come to the Lord on behalf of our children, our families, our loved ones. Lord, help us.

This encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a picture of the local church, you and me, as people, a community, of hope. A place of encounter and meeting. The place where we encounter Jesus – the saviour, the healer, the one who sets us free from the power of evil, sin, darkness, death – these great cosmic events and narratives occur here amongst us. The local church is the place of transformation – our hearts, our lives, our families. Our eyes are opened here. It is also the place of brokenness – we see our own

failures, the failures of others, all too clearly. There is no place to hide. We know one another all too well – like Joseph and his brothers. We grumble and struggle, we quarrel, we get angry, we give up... but it is this place, this place of worship, this sacred space, that is the place of God's grace.

“Lord, even the dogs gather up the crumbs under the master's table...” But the story doesn't end with woman's prayer of desolation and humility and unworthiness. It ends with the Lord's love reaching out to her and her daughter, bringing healing and hope and new life. The Lord reaches out to you and me with that same love.

And so we become people of hope, part of the community of hope: hope for you and me; hope for our families; hope for our land. The community of hope and healing where we gather around the Lord's table; to receive his body and blood; we are part of the community of God's grace.

## **CONCLUSION**

Let's be people of hope, who are part of the community of hope: those who have been touched by the Lord, a church and community of grace, of love, of new beginnings; focused, centred on Jesus Christ as Lord, the one who sets free, saves, forgives.

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