

Dean's Letter, 16 August 2020

Dear Cathedral family, brothers and sisters in Christ

Our gospel reading for today (Matthew 15:21-28) is a puzzling one. The Lord's interaction with the Canaanite woman does not, at first glance, put Jesus in a good light. His response to her plea for help comes across as cold and uncaring. He has no time for her. He is focused entirely on the "lost sheep of the house of Israel". His reply to her heartfelt appeal is almost brutal: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She responds quickly, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Jesus, we could say, is "blown away" by her response, and heals her daughter.

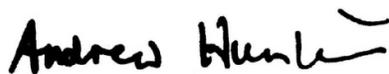
Some commentators suggest that this gospel story shows Jesus shifting in his understanding of his ministry: no longer is he simply the Messiah for the chosen people, he is now called to reach out to those outsiders, the foreigners, the gentiles. He is, dare we say it, converted through his interaction with the Canaanite woman. That is to say, his own prejudices and biases are challenged, and in the end are shifted.

This is further developed in the life of the early church, when the gospel quite quickly moves beyond the Jews only, to the Gentiles, the Greeks and the Romans – and ultimately to you and me. The reading portrays Jesus being what we would call narrow minded or prejudiced, excluding and rejecting some. This is uncomfortable language to use in our world today, where we are faced with issues of race and racism, prejudice, resentment, and questions around power and privilege.

Here in SA, with our history of colonisation and conquest, the Christian faith is in some quarters held up to ridicule and rejection for its perceived role in colonisation. The Gospel arrived in South Africa arm in arm with the settlers, Dutch, French, German and British. It had strong cultural overtones from those countries. Yet, representing as it does a universal message and revelation, the Gospel took root in the lives of many communities and individuals, and has brought transformation, healing and hope to millions. At the same time, it continues to be culturally bound in a number of ways, and there is ongoing debate as to what is culture and what is Christianity.

We as Christians need to navigate and engage with current issues of justice, peace and hope in times of turmoil. The Bible needs to be explored and re-discovered, not merely dismissed as something that has been used to justify gender-based violence, patriarchy, the abuse of power, oppression, homophobia and slavery. We believe that the witness of the church, imperfect as it is, is important and valuable. For some, the church has been damaged and discredited beyond repair. For us, it remains a channel and instrument of God's grace and revelation. We are part of the church in its stand for justice, and in our desire to love God and love our neighbour. Let's engage with current debates in that spirit.

My love to you all

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Hunt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.