

Worshipping Together : Apart
Sunday 5th September 2021 at 10.30am
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

A Call to Worship God

I come to you, Lord God;
You are the one who frees me, you are the maker of all,
the one in whom all hope is found
I come to you, Lord Jesus;
You are the image of God to our world.
I come, thirsty for the Holy Spirit to be at work in my life.
Amen

Hymn – MP 454:

Jack Hayford 1981 Bucks Music Group Ltd

Majesty, worship His majesty;
unto Jesus be glory, honour and praise.
Majesty, kingdom authority,
flows from His throne unto His own,
His anthem raise.
So exalt, lift up on high the name of Jesus,
magnify, come glorify, Christ Jesus the King.
Majesty, worship His majesty,
Jesus who died, now glorified,
King of all kings.

Gospel Reading: Part 1 - Mark 7: 24 – 30 (NIVUK)

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell

at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her *little* daughter.

²⁷ 'First let the children eat all they want,' he told her, 'for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.'

²⁸ 'Lord,' she replied, 'even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.'

²⁹ Then he told her, 'For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.'

³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.



Approaching God in Prayer and Saying Sorry

Lord God, sometimes I wonder whether I approach you too easily - perhaps unthinking; out of habit; sure of your welcome?

Sometimes I have had to overcome fear to approach you in prayer.

A bit like the Gentile woman
I throw myself upon your mercy.

Hear me as I call out to you Lord, and meet me in my need.

Lord Jesus, I praise you for your divine love,
shown to those you healed.

And I thank you for the hope of a time when there will be healing for all, and love will reign.

But I am human, and sometimes I am bound by my prejudices,

my misguided instincts, my inborn fears;
and so I thank you for being human, too.

You Lord know where I'm coming from
when I speak from, fatigue, anxiety or anger
because you came among us in the humanity of Jesus.

But you also know where I'm going.
Lead me forward in faith, and enfold me in your divine love.
Heal my brokenness, help my fumbling humanity.
Help me to carry your kingdom ways in a fallen world.

Forgive me for not listening properly Lord.
In the clamour of a needy world,
I can become deaf to individual voices.
I fail to hear those who are my neighbours;
the ones who are different from me,
whose culture, or face, or ability don't fit,
whose creed is a threatening mystery
or whose lifestyle I sometimes judge.
Open my ears, Lord, so that I will hear about their needs,
and respond in the fullness of healing love.

Forgive me when I have not loved others as you have loved me,
For when I have given the cold shoulder instead of a welcoming hand.
Forgive me for the times I have spoken words of faith,
but didn't apply the words to my life,
when I lose my voice to speak about you
and when I fail to speak up for people in need.
Have mercy loving God, restore me and cleanse my heart.
Help me to live differently
empowered by your Holy Spirit.
In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

And I pray as Jesus taught us - *Our Father, who art in heaven.....*

Reflections – Part 1

The Syrophoenician Woman was a woman on the margins of society. There's no mention of a husband – the child's father – and to add to her alienation her daughter has a demon!

She is a Syrian woman living in Phoenicia, the land of the Canaanites who were the ancestors of the Phoenicians and old enemies of Israel.

According to Mark, this is the first time Jesus and his disciples have travelled out of Jewish territory and into Gentile lands.

Perhaps Jesus wanted to avoid any more conflict, or perhaps he wanted an opportunity to teach the disciples privately, or perhaps he just needed a break!

But his reputation as a healer and exorcist had gone before him, even into the region of Tyre.

This unnamed woman begs Jesus to cast an unclean spirit out of her 'little daughter'. The Greek word '*thugatrimon*' is a diminutive form of the word 'daughter', often used to indicate affection.

But Jesus seems to be dismissive of her predicament. He seems brusque to the point of rudeness.

Or is he? Perhaps this is one of those conversations where body language and intonation – of both Jesus and the woman – would have been crucial. And, of course, that's the one thing that words on a page and 2,000 years of time can't convey to us. Was Jesus really angry at having to deal with someone of a different race? He can hardly have been surprised to meet a Gentile woman, he was after all in non-Jewish territory! We really need to be flies on the wall at the time of this conversation.

So, while I think of it, was anyone else listening to this conversation? Was this exchange of words for their benefit, or just for the woman's?

Given that the rest of the chapter has been about challenging ingrained, legalistic attitudes, it's possible to imagine that he's doing the same here, but now on a one-to-one basis, because Mark says nothing about an audience here.

Jesus also uses an affectionate diminutive, because the Greek word translated 'dog' – *kunarion* – perhaps best describes a small dog kept as a pet, rather than a working, or wild dog.

Jesus says 'Let the children (that is, the Israelites) be fed first'.

Now, there's a word that stands out - '*first*'.

To say 'first' is not to say never! It is to say that there *will* come a time when the Gentiles will also be saved, their day *will* come, but Jesus' first mission is to the Israelites - the Jewish community - who are preoccupying his time and testing him just now.

Back to the ideal of being a fly on the wall! I wonder, was Jesus actually intending to put this woman down, or did he have a twinkle in his eye, a humorous tone in his voice and a little chuckle? I suspect the woman did, with her quick-fire response!

What Jesus said gave this desperate, quick-thinking woman a loophole, and because of it she could point out that pet dogs are permitted to eat the crumbs that fall from the table while the children are eating. In other words, she concedes Jesus' point, that he will prioritise the Jewish community, but at the same time asserts her right to receive a share – just a little bit of his healing power – even before he completes his mission to the Jews.

And acknowledging the faith she's demonstrated in her tenacity, her persistence, Jesus gives her the assurance she seeks: that her daughter *has been* healed.

And so, Jesus extends God's faithfulness towards Israel out beyond them, into the Gentile world!

Hymn - R&S 72: MP 486: (Tune: Gracias)

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices;
who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
the Son, and him who reigns with them in highest heaven,
the one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now, and shall be ever more.

Martin Rinkart. (1586-1649) tr. Catherine Winkworth. (1827-78)

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 35: 4 - 7a

4 Encourage those who are afraid.

Tell them, "Be strong, fear not,
for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.
He is coming to save you."

5 And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind
and unstop the ears of the deaf.

6 The lame man will leap up like a deer,
and those who could not speak will shout and sing!
Springs will burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.

7 The parched ground will become a pool,
with springs of water in the thirsty land.

Gospel Reading: Part 2 - Mark 7: 31 - 37 (NIVUK)

³¹ Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. ³² There some

people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

³³ After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spat and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, '*Ephphatha!*' (which means 'Be opened!'). ³⁵ At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosed and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. 'He has done everything well,' they said. 'He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.'

Reflections – Part 2

Jesus is the one, the one prophesied by Isaiah who has come to open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf.

After his encounter with the Syrophenician Woman, Jesus continues his journey, avoiding the territory of King Herod, and stops somewhere in the hills above the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

A man is brought to Jesus. This man has family or friends who will support him and bring him to Jesus – the one they have heard can heal him.

The man who is brought to him has lost his hearing and has a speech impediment.

I suspect he wasn't born this way because he has a 'they' – people to help, people to take him to Jesus. If he had been born like this, he would have been an outcast, but this man is cared for.

Jesus takes him aside privately – away from those who brought him before indicating to the deaf man by *signs* rather than *speech*, so that the man can understand, that Jesus intends to heal him.

And Jesus speaks the healing word, Ephphatha – ‘Be opened’.

With his speech and hearing restored, the man – and the others present – completely ignore Jesus’ strict instruction to keep this episode and cure secret – this news is too good to keep quiet about!

So, here are two stories:

A woman with faith in Jesus’ power and compassion comes *alone* bringing her daughter for healing by proxy – she represents her daughter. Despite a rebuff, she persists; she pleads her daughter’s case. And Jesus rethinks his priorities. It is the need immediately before him that becomes the most pressing.

And a deaf man with a speech impediment is *brought to* Jesus by dedicated and faith-full *friends*.

After caring for her severely disabled son for many years, a North Yorkshire woman became an advocate for people with learning difficulties. Her long experience of dealing with authorities, and identifying and upholding the rights of disabled people, together with a determined and compassionate outlook, were put to good use every day in her advocacy work.

Perhaps Jesus puts the question to us ‘how will you be advocates for people on the margins?’

Are we a people who will speak up for the desperate, the powerless and the oppressed? Like the Syrophenician woman did on behalf of her daughter, will we risk embarrassment, insult and ridicule on their behalf?

It almost seems as though the response of the Syrophenician woman was what brought healing for her daughter. Perhaps her gritty determination and good humour – despite being insulted – is an affirmation of the importance and value of advocacy for the helpless. Is there a lesson for us to copy – personally and as Church?

And can we be like the people who brought the deaf man to Jesus? Who can we – who can *you – bring* to Jesus? The deaf man whose voice was faltering was brought to Jesus by ‘others’ (they) and Jesus did the rest of his healing work in private, in the quiet of a personal encounter.

Jesus communicated with him in the way the man needed – with signs rather than speech. When and how do we need to communicate the Gospel differently, in ways that people will understand?

Jesus treated all people as individuals. He entered into their specific situation, every encounter, every healing was different! Jesus didn’t have a ‘one size fits all’ approach. How might we begin to do the same?

If we are to keep the ‘good news’ about Jesus relevant and lively for the healing of the world today, these are all questions for us to grapple with as individual Christians - Jesus’ disciples now – and as Christ’s Church, if we are truly to continue Jesus’ work in the world.

Amen

Here are appropriate hymn words for today to lead us into our prayers for the world and all its people in our current predicaments

Hymn – MP 806:

Graham Kendrick ©1993 Make Way Music

Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord in your suffering world this is our prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
sunrise to sunset, Your kingdom increase!

Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
work for the craftsmen, trade for their skills;
land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
voices to plead the cause of those who can’t speak.

God of the poor, friend of the weak,

*give us compassion we pray:
melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
come, change our love from a spark to a flame.*

Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing fields, scorched earth to green.
Christ for the bitterness, His cross for the pain.

Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams
Plundered and poisoned – our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;
Make us content with the things that we need.
God of the poor, friend of the weak....

Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
until Your justice burns brightly again;
until the nations learn of your ways,
seek Your salvation and bring you their praise
God of the poor, friend of the weak....

Holding the World in Prayer

To those with worried hearts and weak knees - Ephphatha!
be opened.

To those with hope locked away; be opened.

To those ground down by failure; be opened.

To those for whom the grass is always greener; be opened.

Let water pour down; let streams rush over
The Spirit of God is around each one of us – wherever we are;
listen for it!

Loving God, who rescues me and restores me,
I think of those who need your help today.
So I lift before you in prayer those who feel ignored,
those whose problems are swept under the mat,

those whose cries for help are downplayed or devalued.
I pray for those who feel they do not have a place to belong,
a safe place to find support and friendship.

I lift before you in prayer, Lord God, those in situations of captivity,
in whatever sense of the word 'captivity' is manifested,
for those who cannot see a way through the darkness,
for those who feel they have no voice
for those who feel their lives are in pieces
for those who listen for you Lord, but cannot hear you.
I ask that you will touch their lives,
so that they will know you as healer and as friend.

As for me, make me their advocate and their champion;
where the world has abandoned them,
help me to walk beside them – in person,
or through the work of others, enabled by my gifts of money,
showing your love to all who need it.

I hold in prayer now all those situations and people that have caught
my attention this week
and caused me to weep with you Lord God.....
especially for the people of Afghanistan who have lost what they had
only just begun to find – a fragile peace, freedom and choice

And I pray, in a moment of quiet for all those people you have given to
my care, Lord God – my family and my friends.....

And I pray for myself,
that you will equip and enable me to face the challenges of life,
particularly the challenges of a life of discipleship
as I seek to listen for you, as I try to follow your way
and bring people to you.

In Jesus' name I ask you to hear the prayers of my heart,
because I know that you listen for me there.

Amen

Hymn – R&S 574: MP 178:

Go forth and tell! O Church of God, awake!
God's saving news to all the nations take:
proclaim Christ Jesus, Saviour, Lord and King,
that all the world His glorious praise may sing.

Go forth and tell! God's love embraces all;
he will in grace respond to all who call:
how shall they call if they have never heard
the gracious invitation of His word?

Go forth and tell! The doors are open wide:
share God's good gifts – let no one be denied;
live out your life as Christ your Lord shall choose,
your ransomed powers for his sole glory use.

Go forth and tell! O church of God, arise!
Go in the strength which Christ your Lord supplies;
go till all nations His great name adore
and serve him, Lord and King forever more.

James E. Seddon. (1915-83) Copyright © Mrs M Seddon/Jubilate Hymns.

Closing Words and Blessing

Remember that you are held within God's peace
and held within God's love.
So, share it with others.

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

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