

Sunday 9th September 2018
Trinity 15 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 35.4-7a

NT: James 2.1-10, 14-17

G: Mark 7.24-37

We had a burglary at Church last week. It wasn't that exciting, and we are insured, but it was annoying, nonetheless. What we do have is superb CCTV, and so within an hour we had crystal clear images of the baddy. The following day – Thursday – whilst we were still waiting for the police to come and take statements (although the forensic person had already been), I was walking along Church Street when I saw our miscreant. There was no doubt, and I had his photograph on my phone to check. And then there is the dilemma. What should one do? What would you do? Would you confront? Or does one walk away and console oneself that the insurance is covering any loss anyway, and the chances of recovering stolen goods are pretty minimal? This is a difficult choice, but I could not walk away. So I followed, and rang the police as I walked. Irritatingly, I lost him on the far side of Williamson Square, but I had given the police a description and a location and so headed west again. But the game was not up yet: I rang Fr Fergus, knowing that he was heading to the station to get a train, and told him to look out for our suspect around Lime Street. Within a couple of minutes he rang me back and said, 'Got him'. Fr Fergus then also followed him – or 'tailed him' as we like to say – and rang the police, giving them an update on location. The police said they had a patrol in the area, but we haven't had an update since then.

Despite churchwardens making helpful quips about Cagney and Lacey... and then Morse and Lewis, what really struck me is that I was faced with an instant choice but no solution. It was fascinating to run through in my head the consequence of each action: follow... and

then what? Don't follow? Et cetera. How do we face these decisions?

And the reason I mention this is not just to illustrate the exciting lives of the clergy, but also to say that I am confronted by something in today's Gospel, and I don't know what to do with it. I don't know what decision to make. We are told... and let us hope that this reflects the author and not Jesus... that the Syrophenician woman came to sit at Jesus' feet and ask for healing for her daughter. Jesus said, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words, Jesus was there to minister to Jews, not to Gentiles. But what inflammatory language! Children, dogs. This is not how we speak of people. And I want to move on and ignore this bit of the reading. Today's Gospel went on to have a nice healing miracle, in which a deaf man gained his hearing. But my mind is stuck with Jesus' words to the Syrophenician woman.

There is no doubt that in recent years the issue of antisemitism in the UK has become news again in a way which I cannot remember in my lifetime before. This is not the Cable Street Riot of 1936, which was probably the most prominent antisemitic clash of the 20th century, and it was not the everyday acts of antisemitism and race hatred which sadly goes unnoticed and unreported. Instead this is a political party refusing to engage – at least until last week when there were some partial changes – with the reality of antisemitism. There was a choice confronting them, but it was a bit like watching a car crash in slow motion, as over a number of weeks the Labour Party refused to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition, and accompanying examples, of anti-Semitism, without adding some "Yes, but..." clauses. And this in itself is a conversation to be had, but at the same time examples were pouring out of individual examples of perceived antisemitism, and there was a failure to see that the two issues were linked.

And then there is the situation in Israel-Palestine itself, where the participants are confronted with a choice, and the world is confronted with a choice, though not necessarily an obvious answer. Just as the Labour Party cannot dismiss individual acts of antisemitism without relating it to the context of a Party setting itself apart from international definitions, so we cannot look at the state of Israel without remembering the horrific context in which it was established after the war. But this does not mean that we can airily brush aside the situation of the Palestinians, who eagerly await the two-state solution which is implicit in the Balfour Declaration.

These are decision and choices which confront us as realities today, and as Christians we cannot stand apart from this, not least because when we open our own Bible we read the sentences we heard from today's Gospel and we cannot dismiss them, just as we cannot dismiss the fact that in our Old Testament today we heard that our God is coming with vengeance and terrible recompense. But what the prophet Isaiah does say is that when God comes, there will be a moment of revelation: "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped." The search for this revelation seems to be what is shut down in the instances where consequence is not considered. If I start chasing a suspect along a street, what will the consequence be? So my decision must be tempered by outcome. The Israel-Palestine situation will only be resolved when consequence becomes a more pressing concern than cause. And in our ugly story today from Mark's Gospel, the situation is redeemed by consequence, which was that the woman's daughter's situation was solved.

The consequence in this story appears to come about because the eyes of both participants in the story – Jesus and the women – were opened, and their ears unstopped. They

engaged with each other and prioritized consequence over cause. The woman replied using Jesus' language, and he met her in this encounter, and in fact changed his mind: "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter." Each of us is faced with decisions and choices every day, and the separation of cause and consequence seems to me to be helpful as a way of guiding our Christian response to reality. In fact the church has started to do this already in the matter of human sexuality, where a 'cause' continues to divide, but the 'consequence' is creating unity, namely in the recognition that hatred and persecution are not to be tolerated. What Jesus also shows in this story is that it is in dialogue that we bring about consequence. Jesus and the Syrophenician woman were speaking to each other.

There are two points which I am making here. Firstly, that we must not brush over the ugly bits of the Bible, or indeed anything else. They are there to be confronted, and not to be dismissed. I don't like today's reading, and nothing will make me like it, but I am not a better person by pretending it is not there. The second point is that moving our choices through dialogue from being solely about cause and engaging with consequence is the example which we are given in this story. The challenge of living in the world is in fact rarely about right and wrong, but more about having open eyes and ears. What is right and what is wrong will never be fixed outside context, whereas allowing our blind eyes to be opened and our deaf ears to be unstopped is in fact sitting at the feet of Jesus, alongside the Syrophenician woman.

Fr Crispin Pailing