

Sunday 16th August 2020
Trinity 10 (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 56.1,6-8

NT: Romans 11.1-2a,29-32

G: Matthew 15.21-28

Throughout the last couple of decades there has been a seismic shift from categorization to individual recognition. History has always been written in categories: revolts are suppressed, serfs are emancipated, protestants are burned, and catholics are persecuted. Today public policy is still written by the statistician, but the news is reported about individuals, with the consequential jarring of the two. Last week's A Level results were an example of this cultural and political change: statistically, the results were entirely satisfactory, and the algorithms which calculated the results in unique and undesirable circumstances ensured that there was a plausible spread of grades across subjects. However the news reported the obvious injustice experienced by so many individuals. When the history of this episode is written, it will not report the success of the algorithm but the failure to account for each person's performance.

The resurgence of the individual also brings with it the right of self-determination and identification. We cannot be categorized by others when we have the right to determine our own identity. This seems to me to be entirely correct as there cannot be a person alive who has not been hurt at some point by being labelled by someone else. Whatever adjectives you apply to yourself are yours alone: others may have a view, but you have a right to your own identification. In today's society this has come to prominence over issues such as gender identity, but it is equally applicable to a wide range of issues, from social class through to political allegiance.

Today's Gospel reading is strong on categories, but also confronts us with this interplay between labels and self-determination. I should say as well that for many of us this passage is one of the most challenging in the New Testament, as the Canaanite woman is initially denied healing for her daughter because she is a Gentile and, even more challenging, the force of language used which likens her to a household animal. That sermon is for another time, but I am not ignoring or brushing away the offence which this passage causes to so many, including to me.

Some of the redemption of this passage is found in the narrative journey which not only brings healing for the daughter of the woman, but also confronts and challenges the expectations of category. Initially the story relishes in a structuralist interpretation, as we separate out the categories: the woman, in her weakness, petitions the stronger power – in this case Jesus – but is dismissed because she suffers from a second weakness which she does not initially perceive, that she is from a different ethnic or city group. However, the story takes an unexpected turn, because the woman undermines the linguistic expectation and therefore explodes all the categories. In the context of Matthew's Gospel and in particular the first part of this story, the word 'faith' is used as a signifier for the practice of following Jewish teaching. But the woman shows us that what Jesus and the disciples believe is signified by 'faith' is in fact incorrect. And why this is interesting in a structuralist interpretation of the story is that it is the woman who is perceived to have two weaknesses (firstly being in need of help, and secondly being from the wrong category of person) in fact ends up being the powerful person: it is she who redefines the categories and the interpretations.

Now, for those of you who like literary theory, that was a brief and probably not

particularly coherently expressed summary of my reading of this story. It is an incredible story because it turns power and understanding on its head, and it also emancipates the woman from the suppression of both her gender and ethnicity. This is the radical nature of scripture at its best, as this is a story which we condemn because of its characters, but it is the structure of the story which sets it free.

When we look for these categories in our own lives, we find that the radical overhaul by the Canaanite woman is just as applicable to our own faith. Although I spoke at the beginning about the positive relief of freeing oneself from labels imposed by other people, in fact most of us find some comfort in categorizing others and not listening for the voice of the individual. Quite frankly, it is easier. Jesus models for us the liberation brought by listening to the individual. He leads the disciples in seeing the woman not as a category to be despised, but he allows her to reshape their understanding of faith which – when you cut out the unpleasant language of the passage – is moving from faith as a product of religious identity and practice, to faith as complete trust in Jesus.

When we test this reading against the other we have been given today, it is this concept of faith which is revolutionary. In our reading from Isaiah he says: “And the foreigners who joined themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord... these I will bring to my holy mountain.” I have summarized here, but the teaching of the prophet is that people are redeemed by conforming to the criteria which already exist. In the Gospel, the criteria are removed, because it is faith in Jesus alone which becomes the sole criterion, and that faith is visible in both the words and actions of the woman.

Categories therefore become the sticking point, because they lead to false definitions for

the individual. Everything we think we know about everyone else is in fact challenged by the ability each of us has to define ourselves. The Canaanite woman in today's Gospel frees herself from categories because she demonstrates a new and radical faith. The application of this for us is also modelled by the woman, because it is in her persistence that we really see how that faith can be lived by us. Faith is not a category, but an exercise of trust and persistence.

Ultimately, it is this new understanding of faith which we are called to live out, where we are constantly pushing against injustice, prejudice, and categorization through our trust in Jesus. In this faith we must always listen to the voice of the individual and not believe the label which is assigned. It is not so much the content of the story, but the structure of this story, where we find oppression wiped away. And as we listen for the voice of individuals, we also need to find our own voice, not as followers in a crowd, allotted to a category, but as individuals like the Canaanite woman, who finds freedom and healing by standing alone in her faith.

Fr Crispin Pailing