

Trinity XV (Year B Proper 18/23 OT) 2018

Very often our lives change because of our interaction with other people or through an inward growing conviction. Something changes for us - sometimes in a profound way – the sign that God’s Spirit is at work within our lives.

It can be a moment when love is expressed, or when a person points something out about who we are or how we are living. These lead us to consider our values and the way we live or engage with the world. I have probably told you before that I experienced such a moment myself when the Rev. Christine Wilson (now the Dean of Lincoln) said something to me which utterly changed my life, leading as it did to ordination. As I often say, I am living proof that God has a sense of humour! It was and IS a scary journey, sometimes costly, yet it has deepened my knowledge of God’s love for me revealed through Jesus Christ. My new pathway has led me to this shared journey of faith with you - my dear friends - together with my huge desire to share my faith with those within the village community and beyond who don’t know of the transformational love of Jesus Christ within their lives.

Some will know the account of a fifth century monk, Telemachus, who felt an inner calling to travel to Rome from his native Greece to speak out against the gladiatorial games which were still taking place for the entertainment of Roman citizens. It is said that he followed the crowds to the Coliseum where two gladiator slaves were fighting to the death. He jumped into the arena and tried to stop them, shouting, ‘In the name of Christ, hold back!’ The gladiators are said to have stopped, but some of the indignant spectators rushed into the arena and beat Telemachus to death. When the crowd saw him lying dead they fell silent before leaving the stadium, one by one, and three days later Emperor Honorius decreed an end to such games throughout the Roman Empire. That urgent call within Telemachus produced profound fruit, even though it was at the cost of his life.

Our Gospel reading today tells of profound moments of change for different people, including Jesus himself. Until this point, Mark has represented the Lord as ministering to his own people. He, as a Jew, has preached and taught of the New Life of the Kingdom to those who were his own. But today this changes because of his interaction with a Syrophenician woman. Jesus has moved into an area of Palestine where he becomes the foreigner.

She, a land-owner and Gentile - a non-Jew - comes asking for freedom for her daughter who has a mental illness. His words? *‘First let the children eat all that they want – it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.’* In other words, ‘Let my brothers and sisters of my faith hear my words before any outsiders’ That is putting it politely! If we heard him using language such language in our day and age we would feel deeply uncomfortable. Indeed, it would probably mean his ending up in court or at the very least with a police warning. It is not Jesus, meek and mild in any shape way or form.

The harshness with which Jesus answers the woman’s first request is unparalleled in the Gospels. Dogs were seen as ‘unclean’ in the Palestine of Jesus’ day. So were Gentiles. Although Jesus has steadily been redefining the sense of holiness within his earlier ministry, reaching out to those considered ‘sinners’ according to the strict ordinances of the Law of Moses, this ministry has been solely directed at his own people.

The Syrophenician woman challenges him politely as she answers back! 'Yes Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' What courage this woman has, and all sorts of boundaries are crossed; the status of women – the boundary between stereo-typical male dominance and female submissiveness; the boundary between an itinerant Jewish preacher and a Greek landed property owner; the outsider against the status quo; and then..... a change on the part of Jesus. Her encounter changes him. No longer is it just **my** people, but the profound message and healing for **all** people. The child is liberated, and so too is Jesus. In other words, this understanding opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers, as the words of the great Christian hymn *Te Deum* eloquently puts it. The children's bread Jesus talks of become a banquet of love, and the Lord offers himself as the Bread of Life at this Table Sunday by Sunday.

We then have the account of the healing of the man unable to hear or speak until the actions of Jesus, These movements – touching the ears and the tongue, the gazing heavenward and that groan of the Spirit, and then – 'Ephphatha - Be opened,' all signs that through Jesus Christ, if we place our lives in his hands, we too can have our ears opened and our tongues unloosed to draw others to the fullness of life in Jesus Christ.

Our journey with Mark reaches a critical stage. Jesus is changed by his encounter with a desperate mother. The message and the power of the love of Jesus is not to be confined to narrow boundaries of an internal cultural ghetto – No! The Church is called to proclaim the Good News of abundant life – life beyond our imagining – found through Jesus Christ, and in great love to confront human suffering with the knowledge of that new life.

What implications does this have for each one of us within this building today? - indeed, for the whole of God's people? In the Letter of James, we have a very practical and down to earth challenge which seems as relevant to 2018 as it was in 80 AD. In a society like ours, which values people who have much money, great power or celebrity status, James calls us to turn our cultural assumptions upside-down and inside-out. As Christians we are called to show respect to everyone we encounter, despite social or economic status, treating all people as children of God and our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we are called to go beyond this, because Christianity is not just about being nice.

You will see that I have put something on the sheet about Crawley Open House - a centre for homeless people which has carried out vital work for many years. It is dependant on a grant from the county council to survive, and currently because of budget cuts faces closure next April. I have asked people to sign the online petition against this cut, in spite of the fact that I don't agree with some of the intemperate language used. I know that times are hard and that the world is going through unprecedented change on many fronts, yet we are continually told that we live in the six richest economy in the world. As James points out in his Letter, our faith calls us to action, and that includes speaking out.

What of similar situations? Proper provision for those suffering from mental illness - many of whom fall through the net; children with special needs receiving no proper support at schools (including our own) - again because of budget cuts; the scandalous state of many

prisons with no hope of proper rehabilitation for inmates. You can add your own bugbear to the list. Where does the buck stop? The State? Politicians? Local Government?

Ultimately, WE are called to seek to bring about transformation within the world in whatever way we can, be it through action, word and prayer. We are called to hear Jesus saying to us day by day, **'Ephphatha,'** 'Be opened,' - called to open our ears, mouth and minds, and in so doing, find that through the knowledge of the self-giving Love of Jesus Christ, our lives will act upon the dead and dry places within humanity so that, 'waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of bubbling water.'



Modern Greek Orthodox Icon - 'Εφφαθά

Isaiah 35:4-7

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

‘Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.’

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,

and the thirsty ground springs of bubbling water.

James 2

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Mark 7: 24-end

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, ‘Ephphatha’, that is, ‘Be opened.’ And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’