

Sermon – Trinity 14 2021

Our gospel reading this morning/comprises two of Jesus' healing miracles. Due to their location and the people involved, these miracles are of huge significance to our understanding of Jesus and the mission of God.

Jesus is not on home territory but travelling amongst Gentiles in the regions of Tyre and Sidon.

In the first story a remarkable encounter takes place between Jesus and a Syrophoenician woman whose daughter is ill. The encounter is remarkable partly because of gender and partly because of ethnicity; a Jewish teacher in conversation with a Gentile woman would be a rare sight indeed. In an exchange that scholars cannot agree upon – is Jesus testing or teasing the woman or is Jesus revealing his own prejudices? – Jesus compares the people of Israel, described as children, with Gentiles, described as dogs. In response the woman answers robustly and for her strength her child is healed.

In the second story God's love breaks through the barrier of disability, rather than gender or ethnicity. A deaf and dumb man is brought to Jesus and his friends beg for healing on his behalf. Jesus responds in private, declaring upon the man, Ephphatha – be opened! This exhortation to open the ears and speech of the man is in sharp contrast to Jesus' apparent desire throughout this reading to remain hidden and unknown. Yet there is no stopping the gospel once the news is out; the good news of Jesus Christ is unstoppable.

The passage ends with a beautiful reflection that harks back to the creation story – he has done everything well.

These encounters with Jesus demonstrate beyond all doubt that the appeal of the gospel is universal, for all people and for all time; and that no social, political or economic divisions created by the selfish and insecure can stand in the way of God's love.

This is a deeply challenging message for us today in a world so divided, especially along ethnic, national and religious lines. Whatever one's view about the crisis in Afghanistan and the resulting refugee crises that looks certain to engulf Europe in months to come, it is essential that we help individuals caught up in human disasters to retain their dignity as people, like us, who are also created in the image of God.

World events sometimes move very quickly and this has certainly been the case these past weeks. Public opinion clearly shifted in this country in a matter of days, and public pressure continues to build on our government to respond more generously to those Afghans who put their lives at risk by working for us these past twenty years.

Forced migration, of course, is a major biblical theme from the Exodus to the birth of Christ and beyond. It gives rise to the biblical injunction to protect the widow, orphan and stranger, and so, I for one cannot think of a Christian response that would say anything other than 'welcome'.

But moving from the particular to the general, are there any limitations to the commandment to love God and neighbour in response to God's love of us? Will God's love save us all regardless?

If we travel back several hundred years, the Christian faith in this country played an important role in ensuring social cohesion through a policy of carrot and stick, in which a certain level of behaviour was maintained essentially

through fear. A literal reading of scripture provided ample evidence of the awful consequences awaiting those who fell short of God's tough ethical expectations. And doom paintings in churches demonstrated this visually for those for whom their literacy was limited.

Today there are far fewer Christians in this country for whom a literal understanding of heaven and hell makes sense. This may be partly the influence of science though I suspect it is rooted more deeply in a renewed appreciation of the generosity and humanity of God.

For Evangelical Christians the idea that all people might be saved is particularly difficult. I have two books at home whose authors have faced ostracism by some in their church tradition because they have articulated a more Universalist position. Robin Parry, a well-known evangelical in the United States, wrote "The Evangelical Universalist" but under the pseudonym of Gregory MacDonald such was his fear of retribution. More openly, but facing similar opposition, the well-known British evangelical Rob Bell, wrote "Love Wins" a book that explores the biblical basis for a richer understanding of salvation than the simple dichotomy of heaven and hell. Both books challenge the assumption that God's love is in some sense limited or can be legitimately expressed violently or experienced as punishment.

Yet, if God's love is not only universally available but universally received, where does this leave judgement and what merit is there in living a good life?

None of us can be certain what happens upon our death but I do remain confident that there is some experience of review and judgement; that in some sense our lives are weighed, and we come to a fuller understanding of our lives in the light of God's love. Is it only in death perhaps

that we come to know the full impact of the lives we have led?

If hell is the absence of love, then, yes, I can imagine that for some hell might be the only future existence. But I prefer to hope that all are given the opportunity to see broken relationships restored and God's unconditional love received.

If hell is the absence of love, then heaven surely, is the fullness of love, and therein may lay a greater challenge for us. For although we have all given love to others, there are none here for whom love has been our only expression in life; for such is the fallen nature of humanity.

In all these ramblings I sense I am moving towards a position in which I hope, upon death, for a process of reconciliation to oneself, to others and to God. For how could heaven be heaven without reconciliation with those whom I have offended?

But where does this leave us in this life? What merit is there in living a good life today, if tomorrow all might be forgiven anyway?

The answer surely lies in John 10.10. We live as good a life as we can, for that is the purpose of life. The swiftest route to fullness of life – as both the Syrophenician woman and the deaf mute discovered – is through a life lived in and with Christ. Or as the prophet Micah put it: Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. That is one prophetic voice we all still need to heed.

Amen.