



9 September 2018

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **255 the Kingdom of God**
 636 O love that wilt not let me go
 249 Jesu, Jesu fill us with your love
 701 Heaven shall not wait
 748 Glorious things of thee are spoken

Readings: **Proverbs 22.1-2, 8-9, 22-23**
 James 2.1-10, 14-17
 Mark 7.24-37

Prayer – Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the word of my lips, and the mediation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. AMEN.

Although the new Church year doesn't begin until the start of December, last week with the President and Vice President of Conference we started our Methodist year - and the summer holidays are over and the schools have gone back. Sandals are in the closet and jumpers are out, it's the new year.

So this feels like a good time to be asking big questions about who we are and where we're headed: what kind of church are we? what kind of church do we want to be? what does God want of us here? All our scripture speaks to these questions today.

Before we get too serious, though, you know I love a good proverb. We had some humdingers in today's reading from Proverbs 22 – not often we get to read the book of Proverbs in worship and these weeks we do - if you are having the kind of day that makes you want to light your hair on fire and run down the street with frustration, take a deep breath and open Proverbs. Drink it. By no means are they all correct guides for living, and treat them with you brain switched on - but nonetheless hear the deep sense and a real record of human beings trying to grapple with the real stuff of living. This is kitchen-table theology, or as a US Methodist friend of mine, Tom Albin calls it, 'pick-up truck theology'.

That is, talk about God in relation to the ordinary stuff of life. Every culture every language has its proverbs.

Example – an old one, in the Ga language from present day Ghana. ‘The one who carries the water is more likely to break the pot’ – meaning, that folk who stay home and let others do the water carrying are less likely to break the water jar – perhaps – but they aren’t the ones taking the burden of getting water, are they? And I get so thirsty – I read the news, I hear the reality of life and I get so thirsty.

What kind of church are we? What kind of church do we want to be? What does God want of us here at City Road, or at our home church if we have travelled to be here today?

Well, first and foremost, a real risk-taking church – John Wesley answered these questions by saying that the Methodist Church must ever ‘...remember that it was raised up in these islands to spread scriptural holiness by the proclamation of the evangelical faith.’ TO spread scriptural holiness – not holier than thou-ness, no. Holiness. That is, down to earth actions and testimony – like from Proverbs, and the letter of James, and the Gospel - to show that the Jesus is still in love with this world, and still at work for our good – ephphatha, be opened.

Turn to James with me - James is describing what a well-functioning Christian community should look like. And he ends with a stark warning: “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” In a lively and well-functioning Christian community, faith should be expressed through works. Put another way, love of God is to be translated into acts of loving kindness towards those most in need. So if it takes risks, our church might also think of itself as active. Feet to the ground.

The bedrock of our faith is that we are all made in the image of God and therefore equally valued by and precious to God, regardless of who we are and how we look on the outside. And yet, as a universal Church we too easily respond most warmly to those who look most like us – or who look most like who we think we are or who we would like to be.

Holiness, in Wesleyan tradition, is low to the ground – it is stable stuff not palace stuff. Kitchen tables, bus stops, and side streets. And active.

What kind of church are we? What kind of church do we want to be? What does God want of us? Not just an inclusive church, but a church that goes out of its way to protect the less powerful, the less esteemed, the less beautiful and less wealthy. That says more than 'all are welcome to come here and join us,' but says rather 'what do you long for, let me come join with you in that longing.'

Risk taking, active, seeking, going out – and it comes together in the Gospel, where we see Jesus reaching out to those least like himself. He makes the first move, as he travels north-west from the Sea of Galilee out into Gentile, non-Jewish territory, and specifically to Tyre. Tyre is a city on the shores of the Mediterranean, about 40 miles north-west of the Sea of Galilee; it's part of Lebanon now, but in Jesus' time was part of Phoenicia, which was a province of Syria, and it was not the kind of place where a good Jewish boy went. In other words, Jesus goes far outside Israel's boundaries, far beyond the world of the children of God, as his tradition considered it.

And what does Jesus do there? He heals two Gentile, non-Jewish people. So today's Gospel is all about finding faith where you'd least expect it. It's all about the crossing of boundaries. Geographical boundaries, certainly, but also ethnic, sexual and cultural ones. The Syrophenician woman is the ultimate outsider, we might say: she's the wrong gender, the wrong class, the wrong race, the wrong nationality, the wrong religion. Here we have a presumably quite well-off, home-owning Gentile, Syrophenician woman seeking the help of a poor, itinerant, male Jewish preacher.

In the culture of ancient Palestine, women didn't address men – they could speak only if first spoken to – but the Syrophenician woman comes up and speaks to Jesus, a single man, in private, and, despite bowing down at his feet, is far from submissive in her conversation with him. Well, we still have tradition of the untoward, anything-but-submissive woman in Methodist tradition – just ask Susanna Wesley, mother of Charles and John, and another 17 children to boot – whose kitchen table is inside our communion table. But then Jesus seems to reject her – and cruelly - what's going on here? In a passage which is all about the crossing of boundaries, Jesus seems to be building up walls, letting us off the hook?

Remember what has come just before this, in Mark's telling: the passage we heard last week where Jesus has an argument with the scribes and Pharisees for their ideas about "purity" and their condemnation of Jesus's own disciples, who were eating without having ritually washed their hands first.

But it wasn't just an argument about food; it was also about people: who's in and who's out, who's clean and unclean? Ultimately, it was an argument about power. And friends, there is nothing more current in our world today, nothing more relevant than arguments about power and its abuse. And not just at world leader level – at the level of running businesses, and in contract negotiations, and who decides who gets to take a work break when or where, or get into which country when, and where, or get a leg up in a job interview because of the colour of their skin or not. Those questions – power and how we will use it - that's what is behind what we see in today's Gospel. This is risky stuff.

One way of understanding today's Gospel is that Jesus is playing the Pharisees at their own game, taking to its extreme the position that they had just adopted with him based on the purity laws and demonstrating just how absurd it is – especially when faced with desperate human need – to put up boundaries between people. Through his conversation with the Syrophenician woman, who puts her trust in Jesus we see that God's grace and mercy and healing are for everyone, unconditionally. In response to an outsider, Jesus reveals that he is there for all people, with no exceptions, no limits; in response to an outsider, the Lord of heaven himself acknowledges that in the kingdom of God there can be no outsiders.

Through his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, Jesus debunks once and for all the myth that some people are unclean and untouchable and unlovable and beyond the reach of all that is decent and good and Godly. Today's Gospel helps us to see that every time we draw a line between who's in and who's out we'll find the God made manifest in Jesus on the other side – because his is a gospel of extreme inclusion.

What kind of church are we? What kind do we want to be? What does God want for us? Jesus went on into a different part of Gentile territory – to the east of the Sea of Galilee – and performs a very earthy, hands-on healing of a deaf man with a speech impediment: he shows no respect for purity laws as he "put his fingers into the man's ears and spat and touched the man's tongue". And the reading goes on: "Then looking up to heaven, he sighed

and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened'." We can't miss the powerful symbolism here of someone being freed to hear, freed to speak: the physical healing represents the ability which is given to those who believe in Jesus Christ to hear the voice of God, the voice of love speaking to our heart, and to speak words of love and consolation to others. Problem is, once we start to hear, can't unhear. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God – and we are falling. Friends, expect that God will open us – any of us who dare to pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done – do you think God will not answer?

So what does this tell us about the kind of church God wants us to be? What do we in here, in the City hear when we hear that exotic-sounding, Aramaic word "Ephphatha"? To what or to whom do we need to be opened? Perhaps it's our ears that need to be opened, so that we can hear the cries of those in need right here.

We will hear the cries of the hungry, the homeless, the minimum waged and the sub minimum waged - oppressed, the marginalised. And our tongue will be released so that we can speak prophetic words of love and compassion into what feels like an increasingly cold and cruel world. When our mouths are shut at moments that require someone to speak out and challenge injustice and inequality and intolerance – then we need the healing command "Ephphatha", be opened.

Our faith is in a God who loves all people unconditionally. But "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead".

What kind of church are we? What kind of church do we want to be? What does God want of us? Nothing less than to risk breaking ourselves, being opened – being made holy – to be strong, confident, un-anxious, kind. TO go to the world expectant, excited. Spreading scriptural holiness, through the proclamation of the evangelical faith. 'The one who carries the water is more likely to break the pots than the one who stays home,' but our God will not leave us thirsty.

*A prayer for holiness:
Hallow our things past,
hallow our things to come.
Hallow our will, hallow our intention
hallow our bodies and our love.*

Hallow our homes and work,

our world and hopes.

Sigh over us, sigh in us: 'Be Opened.' (Mark 7.34)

Amen