



Worship at Home—16 August 2020

The Scripture Readings are taken from:

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8 and Matthew 15: 10-28

Read by Krys Hume

Call to Worship

Jesus said, "I came so that you may have life and have it abundantly"

Let us praise God; let us reach out in care and courage so that the goodness of life may be for all God's children.

Let us Pray

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, you are amazing and awesome
And we are blessed that although we are scattered and apart
You join us together as we worship you
Help us to be attentive to you today
That we may grow and learn
Be challenged and comforted in your presence

We confess too that there have been moments this week that have been difficult
Times when we have doubted you or our own best selves
Times when we have not lived up to everything you created us to be
Forgive us the things we have done and should not
The things we have not done when we should

In these tough times when we cannot meet
Reassure us that you are walking beside us
We thank you that you love us no matter our background or circumstance
Your Spirit breaks down barriers and
in you there is always a radical welcome
Guide our hearts towards your warm embrace
That we may fully experience your love.
And we thank you for hearing our prayer in Jesus name.

Amen

Sermon in Lockdown

What would you think if I told you that on your newspaper announcement could only be inscribed with a four-word epitaph? Well, you might respond, it would depend on who would write this epitaph an enemy or a loved one. It might also depend, you might say, on how well this person knew and understood you. If a newspaper critic wrote of a concert pianist the four words: “He was a failure,” you could always say: That was his opinion. But if one of the world’s great musicians wrote, “He was a genius,” then you are more likely to take the remark seriously.

Today we learn of a character in the Gospel who Jesus once described with four immortal words: Great is your faith.

Last week, John Sawkins kindly preached on the text preceding this one in Mathew. He preached on that great story when Peter tried to walk on water towards Jesus and Jesus had encouraged him, “Don’t be afraid, take courage, I am here.” Moments later Peter began to doubt and as he began to sink Jesus said to him, “Why did you doubt me, have you so little faith.”

And so our story this morning Mathew presents a direct contrast to that one as Jesus proclaims the words, Great is your faith.

Only the recipient of these words of faith is not one of the faithful disciples of Jesus. In fact it is a very unlikely and unexpected person who receives this encouragement from Christ.

Jesus had decided to travel with his disciples up north beyond Galilee to the neighbouring land of Tyre and Sidon. This was the land of the Gentiles where the Phoenicians and Canaanites lived. Most scholars believe that Jesus took the disciples away on retreat in order to have time alone with them, to teach them and pray, to prepare them for things to come. In Tyre and Sidon they would be unlikely to encounter the throngs of Jewish crowds that had been following Jesus wherever he went and it would provide a chance to get away from the hostility of the Pharisees.

However the peace and anonymity didn’t last. The word about Jesus had spread. Soon a Canaanite woman, whose daughter was gravely ill was following them around, crying out to Jesus, “Son of David have pity on me.” She was desperate for him to heal her sick daughter.

This mother was brave to be following a band of Jewish men. Firstly because she was a woman in a traditional time and secondly, because she was a Canaanite, a Gentile. For centuries the Canaanites were the arch enemies of the Jewish people. There had always been ill-feeling and rivalry between the peoples of Israel and Tyre/Sidon. The Jews used to slur the Canaanites referring to them as the word for “stray dogs.”

At first the disciples are embarrassed and just want this nuisance of a woman to leave them be. However Jesus stops and has a very intense, intentional, interaction with her.

None of us speak Aramaic, so when we read the bible, it can be hard to unpack the chat between Jesus and this woman—the text might even seem uncomfortable. However Jesus is actually breaking down the barriers with some banter. When Jesus refers to language of dogs he is poking fun at the divisive and derogative language of the day—language she would expect to hear from Jewish men.

Jesus does not use the usual derogatory word for “street dogs” but rather uses another word—used for a beloved pet. She responds quickly, that even a pet dog gets treats from his master’s table. Using humour, Jesus eases the tension because he sees her real need and humanity. He is heartened by her courage, her humour, her love for her daughter, and not least her faith.

This is a key moment in the Gospel of Mathew because it is seen as the first indication that Jesus didn’t just come to save and heal the people of Israel, but all people—as is clear at the end of the gospel when he says, Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples.

Jesus was a unifier, a reconciler, someone who broke down the barriers between people. As a gifted orator, he undercut the laws and rules the Pharisees used to exclude and label people. Jesus proclaims that it is not following rules that makes us good or bad—it is what is in our hearts.

Therefore this story in Matthew is not only a healing miracle but a teaching moment.

Even today it is amazing how much we are good at differentiating ourselves from one another. How we identify ourselves, what we are known for; our culture, family, background—these things are tied up with our identity. This isn't all bad . . . these things impact how we form our relationships with friends and with the faith community and how we value our roles at home, work and everywhere. The problem only comes when our differences, the things we are known for, become things that divide and push us apart .

We are so very good at making people feel they are not good enough. Isn't that often true of some of the political rhetoric about refugees.

I heard about an advertisement for a lost cat that was found in London. The founders advertised, for its owners in the words, "Found kitten with white paws and a bib. Very affectionate. Answers to the name, "Go Away.""

Even as Christians we are good at labelling people by differences that divide us. We have our denominations Baptist or Methodist, Catholic or Protestant. For some it is important to be baptised, for others to be born again, Some prefer traditional hymns and others prefer contemporary praise. Even these little things can cause division. Our faith reminds us that as Christians we can never afford to dwell on labels or tastes that divide. Our trust in Jesus affirms we are all new creations, united in him as children of God.

The Christian author, C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay entitled "The Inner Ring". He explains that in any playground or office or church there can form little groups or rings of people who are on the "inside". And those who aren't: those who don't get picked at playtime, those who stand on their own in the lunchroom. Lewis says that the existence of such rings is not necessarily bad. We're finite beings, and we can only have intimate friendships with a limited number of people. But he says that the desire to gain status or self-worth by being part of an "inner ring" that is deeply destructive. It causes people to compare yourself with others, to feel anguish when they are left out, and deeper anguish when someone close gets let in. Worst of all, those who get in, often want to keep others out, because it's the exclusive nature of the group that makes them feel good. A fascinating insight. . .

Sadly this instinct to include and exclude were not just true in Jesus day. Even since lockdown there have been women fighting for gender equality and respect. There has been, since the death of George Floyd a renewed realisation of the constant need to tackle racism and its many forms, from unconscious bias to racial profiling by police. This week ITV launched a series of short films called Unsaid Stories for Black Lives Matter. The actor Nicholas Pinnock was interviewed saying that we have become too used to defining racism as a white verses black issue because it was used to justify slavery. But prejudices can go across all cultures, and races and identities such as islamophobia or antisemitism. He said racism can even exist between black on black. For example, I watched a documentary about the criminals who incited the genocide in Rwanda. These Hutu men bought a radio station and over its airways started labelling the Tutsis as cockroaches to be eliminated. Their rhetoric led to slaughter.

These are the evils that Jesus talked about when he said, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles' What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and out of the heart can come evil intentions, murder, false witness, slander. These are what defile.

I am glad to hear in the news that Scotland has laws to protect people from prejudice due to ability, race, religion or gender . . . and soon now there will be stronger laws to prosecute those who incite hatred against others because of difference—even if they may be fat or thin or like myself, vertically challenged.

Here is a little history lesson!: Prince Eugene of Savoy–Carignano (1663 –1736). Prince Eugen grew up in the court of King Louis the XIV of France. He had a very poor physique and so King Louis thought he should be a cleric. It is said that he was stunted in growth, ugly, sickly, pale and hunched and so when he approached King Louis because he earnestly wanted to be a soldier, the King refused to take him seriously. So he left France and headed for Vienna where the Ottoman Turks were invading Europe and he joined the Habsburg Monarchy. By the time he was 20, he was a commander in the Austrian army. By 29 a Field Marshall and by 40, a commander in Chief of the whole army. His military career spanned six decades, serving three Holy Roman Emperors and he gained Europe-wide fame as a great imperial commander who defended his country numerous times against offenses from the Turks, Polish and French. He became a pain in the side of Louise the XIVth because his military expertise saved the Habsburg Empire from French conquest.

What a great story! Having been written off as a youngster, he refused to let his appearance or the opinions of people deter him. He is remembered as one of the most successful commanders of his time, who rose to the highest office at the Imperial Court in Vienna.

The woman already knew she was in the group subjugated by her class and background as one of the dogs. She knew that she was at the lowest level a gentile and an outcast—not worthy of the crumbs thrown out from those in Jewish Society. This also makes her determination to approach these men and to find Jesus more remarkable. She was willing to overcome the obstacles and barriers of prejudice in her way and she persevered to get help for her daughter. What a difference determination and perseverance can make. These are essential qualities that can help us all when we face the trials and tribulations of life.

It is said of the inventor Thomas Edison, that he often tried and failed many times before he succeeded. In one experiment it wasn't until his 70th attempt that he reached the goal and got it to work. He simply reflected, "I now know 69 ways not to do it." He would not quit.

The disciples didn't see what Jesus saw in the Canaanite woman. Here is a lovely poem about her written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette entitled "She Came to Jesus."

She came to Jesus from outside the fold —
Canaanite woman! Persistent and bold!
Looking to Jesus, she wanted to see
One who would help her and set her child free.

Claiming a blessing, a touch of God's grace,
She knew God's love was not bounded by place.
Jesus, you listened, debated — then healed —
For in her asking, her faith was revealed.

God, you still bless those who seek you in prayer.
You welcome dreamers who faithfully dare.
In Christ, now risen, your mercy extends:
Those on the outside are welcomed as friends.

I was listening to a podcast on Radio 4 that examined the various ways that the world's leaders have responded to the Pandemic. It was noted that those leaders who have done the best have been ones who could unify people in the effort. The leaders who have used their power to cause division or to exclude or deride or blame have fared less well. At times such as this, even when we are apart and we long together we must work ever harder to try to be united and to tear down barriers. I know it is hard—even two meters and lockdown and facemasks feel as if there are new barriers.

But we trust our faith and as a faith community that we are together, united as the people of Currie and its churches and with the whole communion of faith in heaven and on earth in our prayers. We remember today that no one is excluded from the grace and mercy, from the healing love and salvation promises of God.



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Krys Hume

Lord, we thank you for the richness of your creation, for the vastness of the universe and all it contains. We are part of your creation and we thank you that we can enjoy fellowship and friendship with each other and share your gifts of hope, joy, love and faith, albeit in a limited way at the present time.

Lord, we thank you for Jesus Christ, and that through his life, death and resurrection you have made it possible for us to know you in a whole new way. We thank you for the words contained in the scriptures which help us to live our lives according to your wishes. We thank you for the Holy Spirit which illumines our lives and pray that we will always make an effort to follow where the Spirit leads us.

Lord, it is good to give thanks. Let us always remember to be thankful and to express our thanks—whether to you or to our fellow humans. It costs us nothing but can make such a huge difference. Keep us conscious of the needs of our friends and neighbours and may we seek to uplift them at all times.

Lord, we pray for all people whose lives have been touched by coronavirus, here and worldwide. Be with them and their families and friends. Give strength and stamina to the NHS staff and others who care for those affected by the virus. We pray too for scientists who are seeking a Covid vaccine; direct their research in a positive direction to enable an effective vaccine to be found as quickly as possible. We pray for those whose lives are being affected through loss of work or loss of income and even the possibility of losing their home. May they be aware of your comfort and strength.

Closer to home, we think of our children and young people whose education has been severely disrupted by Covid 19. After months at home, they are now going back to schools and universities, but not as it was before. We pray that your spirit will keep all the children, young people and staff safe and that there will not be a rise in infections.

As if Lebanon did not have troubles enough, the huge explosion in Beirut has wrought appalling devastation over a vast area. Lord, we pray for all the people affected; comfort them and give your strength and guidance to all those who are trying to help in any way they can.

Lord, we pray for our world and the needs of its people everywhere. You know what they are. We pray for those known to us personally to be in particular need; those who are sick and those who are dying; for those who mourn and those who are hurting; for those who are overwhelmed by the burdens in their lives. We name them in the stillness of our hearts.

SILENCE

We make our prayers in the name of our Lord Jesus in whose words we now pray.

Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever.

AMEN