

Isaiah 35:1-7

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendour of our God.

³ Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;

⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

Mark 7:24-37

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.^[a] He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. ²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. ²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

²⁸ "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

²⁹ Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Jesus Heals a Deaf and Mute Man

³¹ Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.^[b] ³² There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him.

³³ After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. ³⁴ He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "*Ephphatha!*" (which means "Be opened!"). ³⁵ At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. ³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

On Monday at morning prayer we got to discussing which person of the Trinity we found it the easiest to relate to...by which I mean some felt drawn to Jesus and He is their focus. Others to God the Father, others to the Holy Spirit.

Robert reminded us we were rather splitting hairs because God is one...so part of the mystery and wonder of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit is that we can draw close to God in a way that feels most natural too us.

If it's Jesus that you are drawn to and can relate to then the Scripture passage today is the most difficult in the Gospels.

If you just read it plainly, it is a Jewish man being bluntly rude to a Gentile woman.

Over time there have been many explanations for why Jesus said and did what he did. They all feel a bit like airbrushing the story. Here's one...

Jesus rude and blunt response was a carefully considered rebuff designed to push the woman to reveal her faith.

So let me ask you. How many men do you know, who are tired after a journey, have recently had stressful time at work, who are trying to get away from it all and don't want to be bothered...how many men do you know can instantly come up with a clever, subtle plan designed to increase faith in a woman they have never met??

None.

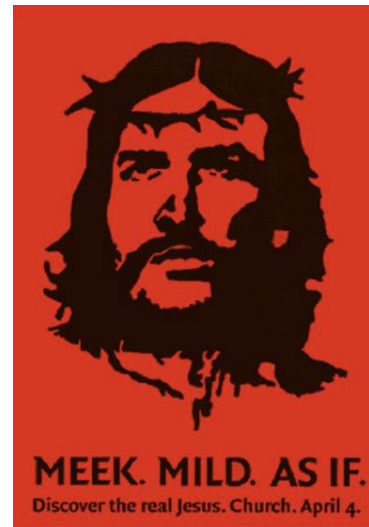
If you read the passage in a straightforward way – Jesus is a man behaving badly.

There are plenty of other suggestions about this first story – that he didn't call her a dog but was making reference to a household pet...that his blunt reply was a bit like saying "charity begins at home."

Jesus calls her a dog. It's that rude.

If we accept what it's telling us...what does that reveal?

It reveals Jesus humanity.



In 1999 Chas Bayfield, Martin Casson and Trevor Webb created an image of Jesus for Ely Diocese – it was designed to encourage church attendance at Easter.

Based on the iconic photograph and then poster of Che Guevara the atheist revolutionary it caused an absolute storm of comment and controversy.

Tory MP [Ann Widdecombe](#), said: "We should be modelling ourselves on [Christ](#), not modelling Christ on us."

Former Tory MP [Harry Greenway](#), sponsor of the [Conservative Christian Fellowship](#), described the poster as "grossly sacrilegious" and demanded that those responsible for it should be excommunicated.

The Reverend Tom Ambrose, Director of Communications for the [Diocese of Ely](#), said the poster was designed to make people think about Christianity. He said: "We want people to realise that Jesus is not a wimp in a white nightie or someone who is a bit of a walkover, but a strong, revolutionary figure.

If nothing else it jerks us out of complacency and invites us to look again at the real Jesus that we see as we read scripture, not airbrushing out bits that don't fit an image we want to promote.

Taken as we read it, it shows a tired, irritable Jesus adopting the prevailing view of the kind of Gentile woman found in that area of Tyre.

Feminist theologian Sharon Ringe suggests that the story portrays the woman as one of a group in that region whose politics and lifestyle would have been a source of suffering to her mostly poor, rural, Jewish neighbours.

If that's true it explains something of Jesus antagonism towards her...explains, doesn't excuse. But Sharon Ridge goes further and suggests the determined and direct woman displays a faith in Jesus healing power that was markedly absent from Jesus own people in his home town. The Gentile has faith. His Jewish neighbours did not.

Does this encounter change Jesus?

The preceding scripture passage is about hypocrisy. Is the author, Mark showing us Jesus' grappling with his own??

Isaiah tells us the Messiah must suffer. Do we get a glimpse of Jesus struggling and suffering with being human. Like us! The human condition which includes tiredness, irritation and prejudice. If that is what this story shows, it shows us Jesus as truly fully human. Does it also reveal to Jesus through this encounter that although his mission IS to the Jews, it's to start there and later will go to the whole world, faith among Gentiles will not be the exception.

The healing in the story was almost incidental, so having shown us Jesus as human with faults and failings, we see him more clearly as divine in the healing of the deaf mute, albeit in a way that is unique.

Jesus is demonstrating - almost miming for the benefit of the man.

Fingers in his ears. I know you are deaf.
He spat then touched his lips. You have an impediment.
He looks up to heaven and gives a great sigh saying be open.
And the man is healed.

Where does that leave us today – what is this passage saying to us?

The poetry, prophecy and vision of Isaiah 35 is fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Is it being seen among us?

Taking the poetry as a metaphor – do we experience hope, renewal, life, joy, return in this place? I think we do.

Is our proclamation of the Gospel a genuine one and is our experience and life in Christ grounded in the reality of being human? In other words are we real or are we super airbrushed spiritual Christians?

No. I don't; think we are. I think we are living the faith in the reality of life that has sickness, bereavement, birth and celebration, success, disappointment, disagreement, agreement in other words we are reflecting the life of Christ in real life.

How might we take this forward today?

This passage, taken straightforwardly leaves us with an uncomfortable and disturbing image of Jesus.

We can be okay with his anger at the marketplace in the temple – righteous anger.

We can be okay with his fiery criticism of the pharisees, we all know they deserved it.

We can understand his tortured anguish in the garden of Gethsemane, he was facing crucifixion.

Being tired, rude and irritable is not the image we want of Jesus because theologically we believe him to be without sin - so having a bad day doesn't fit.

(I showed here a picture of a notice attached next to a gate. It said Bull in Field)

On my pilgrimage I came across this sign on three separate occasions. Of course, as a man of God I walked confidently through these fields singing hymns and proclaiming the goodness of God.

Wrong...I was extremely anxious and stayed close to the fence calculating how quickly I could jump over and

escape from the field if I needed to. I am not St. Francis, I do not talk to animals.

Seeing Jesus at less than his best allows me to draw closer to him because I'm often less than my best. My faith doesn't feel strong enough, my prayers feel weak and feeble and my hope is vague and uncertain.

This passage shows me real Jesus and goodness knows he gets to see the real me.

It doesn't lessen my faith in him as Saviour or diminish my trust in Him as Lord – rather it increases my appreciation of the life he led and what he overcame for me. There's hope for me yet.

Let's pray.

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 8 September 2024