

Sermon for
the Tenth Sunday after Trinity
Year A



Exorcism of the Syro-Phoenician woman by Michael Angelo Imminraet (1623-1683)

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15: 21-28

St Francis High Heaton
20th August 2017

The events in Charlottesville last Saturday have exposed a difficult subject.

Identity, who we are, is such a powerful part of being human. We are defined by our families of origin, our gender, our sexuality, our race, our religious and cultural heritage, our place of birth and our physical and mental abilities.... and that's before we add in the variables such as education, life experience, religious practice, political and philosophical opinions, relationships, health and migratory status.

Humans are diverse, and diversity makes us interesting, but it also creates challenges because it means that we have many different ways of defining ourselves and each other. In a world of competing resources and conflicting ideologies it is perhaps inevitable that defining ourselves over and against people who are different from us becomes quite critical. The fact of difference also leads to unconscious and conscious prejudice, and for some reason from time to time this builds into events such as in Virginia, but from which none of us are immune.

St Paul wrote to the Galatians *"for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ"* (3:26-7). He continues: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."* (v.28)

Even Jesus himself had to learn this lesson! We heard just now his encounter with a Canaanite woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon, away from his native Galilee. He has been curing people and she appeals to him for her daughter, and his response is unhelpful: *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* (15:24) In other words, *You're not part of the plan.* But she is persistent: *"But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."(v.25)* Jesus' reply is shocking to our ears: *"He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'"* (v.26) This is unfettered prejudice, he called her a dog, she is unperturbed: *She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* (v.27) I wonder whether it was her stubbornness, or the persuasive clarity of her reply which swayed Jesus, but he has a change of heart: *Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly."* (v.28)

In today's passage from Romans, St Paul makes much of Christianity as an expansion of the Covenant of God which is no longer for Jews alone, it is with all people. Everyone is subject to sin, so everyone is equally in need (and deserving) of God's forgiveness. Grace is for all, which means that I have no right to impede the grace of God being shared with anyone else. This picks up the theme we heard in Isaiah this morning, who talks of foreigners and outcasts coming to the holy mountain: Salvation is for all.

It follows that we are all equally loved by God, and so we should have equal regard for one another. Equality is not the same as equity, so even our attempts to get this stuff right don't always go well. For example, a politician is at pains to show that when there's a conflict, there is fault on both sides (which is true, of course) and in a world which prizes equality, differing views might be said to have equal value; except (as the furore over President Trump and Charlottesville have demonstrated) equality under the law (and in the sight of God come to that) does not mean that there is no moral frame of reference: some things are right and some things are wrong.

Martin Luther King was fond of saying "*the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice*". It's a stirring phrase which allowed him to assure his listeners of the ultimate authority of his viewpoint. In November we will mark 50 years since he visited Newcastle to receive an honorary degree. President Obama liked the phrase, and apparently had it stitched into a rug in the Oval Office (I guess by now the rug has been removed!). The words are a paraphrase of another American religious minister of 19th century called Theodore Parker. He was a Unitarian, whose sermons and speeches had an influential impact in his day: his phrase "of the people, by the people, for the people" was quoted by Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address, one of the

foundation documents of the US in the wake of a Civil War which (as we have seen) still haunts the American psyche.

What Parker, an abolitionist, actually said about morality was this:

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

1853 a collection of "Ten Sermons of Religion"

It's important to note that we cannot assume that righteousness will automatically flow. The prophets of the OT looked forward to it, the insight of the New Testament is that in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ God has inaugurated the new world order, but because we are subject to time our capacity to experience this inaugurated kingdom of righteousness depends upon each of us sharing in our part in making it happen. It doesn't happen left to its own devices; to paraphrase another philosopher, *For evil to prevail, the good need only do nothing.*

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor in 1930s Germany..... an ambivalent figure, who at first tried to do business with the Nazis (and made various anti-Semitic statements in the early days) but he ended up opposing them. He was imprisoned but survived the war and was instrumental in the movement by German Christians to express contrition for not opposing Nazism more directly. He was the author of the famous words, also much quoted and paraphrased:

*First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Communist.*

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me

It's not easy to be prepared to speak up for those who are victimised or marginalised by public opinion. We know God wills it, and we know it would be right, but it might mean speaking up for people who might make us feel uncomfortable because they are so different from us....

What this tells me is that there is no easy formula here, beyond our fundamental belief in the *dignity of difference* and *the equal value in the sight of God of every human person*, and *our capacity to face the spiritual challenge which our response to difference makes in us*.

We could do no worse than remember that God puts himself in our shoes, the least we can do is put ourselves in each other's shoes. Last Monday the church remembered Maximilian Kolbe, a victim of the Nazis. He was a Franciscan priest who offered himself in place of another victim in Auschwitz. That is an extreme example, but it is precisely what God did for us in Christ, and it is the pattern of our faith.