

LOVE WINS – MARK

Challenging Teaching

You may be aware of the story about school photos that has recently hit the headlines. Class photos in schools are a common thing. I can remember, many years ago now, having to sit between my sister and brother when having our picture taken at school. I had to sit in the middle because I'm the middle child, and that's how it had to be! We have school pictures of Meg and Zac when they were at school – in fact I still have some of them in my wallet!

But the recent story came from a school in Scotland. Parents were astonished when the class photos were sent via a link to a photography website. It turned out that some class pictures for Aboyne Primary School were taken without some of the pupils in the class present – the children with complex needs. In fact, it turned out that at least two pictures of these classes were taken, one with all the pupils, and one with some pupils absent.

Parents, it appears, were then given the choice as to which class photo they wished to order; the one with all the pupils or the one that excluded the children with complex needs. One parent of a complex needs child said: 'I can't understand how a human can think it's ok to effectively give people the choice to erase children from their classes and their history.'

The school was not responsible for the photos, or the link that gave parents the choice of photos. In a statement the local council said: 'Aboyne is an inclusive school and every single child should be included, engaged and involved in their learning and school experience.' The story shone a spotlight on the kind of community we want our schools to be, and maybe raised the question of the kind of community we want our wider society to be.

I wonder, if we were asked the question about the church, this church, what kind of community we want to be, what would we say? And perhaps, if this church is reflective of the kingdom of the heavens, what we think the kingdom of the heavens is like.

Well, here's what I think I want the community of CBC to be like, because I think it might reflect how the kingdom of the heavens might be:

- I would like the community of CBC to, above all, seek to honour God's name.

- I would like the community of CBC to be a church where leaders seek to lead diligently.
- I would like the community of CBC to enable people to build significant relationships in Life Groups where they can grow together.
- I would like the community of CBC to experience worship that is real, honest, genuine, inspiring and relevant.
- I would like the community of CBC to have a deep desire to reach out to those who don't know the love of Jesus.
- I would like the community of CBC to be shaped by the choice of its people to be fully devoted followers of Christ.
- I would like the community of CBC to be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.
- I would like the community of CBC to be committed to serving the poor.
- I would like the community of CBC to enable everyone to find a place to serve in their gifts.
- I would like the community of CBC to be a strong place for families to learn and grow.
- I would like the community of CBC to love those whom God loves.
- I would like the community of CBC to love without limit.
- I would like the community of CBC to fulfil its vision: That we will love without limit.

So, how are we doing?

How are you, as a member of this community doing? How far are we, are you, a reflection of the truth about the kingdom of the heavens?

As we've travelled through the gospel of Mark, we've seen, I think, something of how the kingdom of the heavens actually is. Today I'm going to focus on an encounter that Jesus has that maybe speaks to the question of what kind of community the kingdom of the heavens is when it meets people who don't fit!

Perhaps it speaks to the challenge of the school photo: who is in, and who is left out? And perhaps it challenges us as to what kind of community we think we are, and what kind of community we want to be.

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. 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. (Mark 7 v 24-30)

In Mark’s gospel, this meeting of Jesus and a Syrophenician woman follows discussion about ritual. And the challenge of the discussion of ritual, is that sometimes we might need to change the way we hold things because they no longer work, or because we need to change the way we think about God. And that’s a whole other talk which we’re not going to do now!

But, maybe, in Mark, Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenician woman expands on that challenge. And perhaps one thought that links the two stories in Mark, is that they have to do with what people in churches think of as virtue. And it might be to do with exclusion: who is in the photo and who is left out.

In Mark 7 v 1-23 the conversation is about tradition and specifically keeping tradition: you know who is in or out by who keeps the tradition properly and appropriately. After that conversation, and having challenged the understanding of keeping tradition as being a virtue, Jesus then travels to Tyre.

Tyre is completely outside of Jewish territory. Tyre is a city of importance, associated with an empire, and a former enemy of Israel. Jesus, in Mark’s gospel, is apparently alone. We don’t know why he goes to Tyre, but a good guess would be to get away and be left alone for a time! What happens in Tyre is surprising, for Mark’s readers, and maybe, for Jesus himself.

Mark tells us that a Greek woman, born in Syrian Phoenicia finds Jesus and asks him to heal her daughter. By calling her a Greek woman, Mark is simply

saying she was a pagan – she wasn't Jewish. And by doing what she's doing, she's breaking all the rules – all the traditions Jews held to, about which Jesus has just had a longer conversation! Jesus himself was challenged about breaking the rules by the religious leaders – that's what started the whole conversation off. So now, for Jesus, the question becomes, what is he going to do?

This woman begs Jesus for his help and fell at his feet. She has taken a huge risk by coming to Jesus – she has crossed a boundary from which there is no going back. She has knowingly, in her desperation, chosen to cross into the 'other' group. Anyone watching might expect Jesus to send her away – after all she is in the wrong group and Jesus is in the wrong place. But Jesus doesn't send her away. Instead Jesus does something that on the face of it might surprise us, even if it might not have surprised anyone watching.

Jesus responds with what might, at first glance, seem like a pretty harsh response to a desperate woman. His response is: "First let the children eat all they want..." This is a way of Jesus reminding himself and the woman that his primary mission and calling is to the Jews. Perhaps Jesus is reminding himself of his calling as he is presented with this challenge from this woman.

The traditionalists would agree with Jesus – he's come for Israel not second-rate gentile riff raff who are female! Jesus then adds to his reminder about Israel by referring to the woman and those outside Israel, as dogs. This is not a compliment! In Jesus day, dogs were almost as unclean as pigs and to be discarded and ignored. This then, at first reading, does seem like a harsh response from Jesus, who appears to be saying he wants nothing to do with this desperate woman.

But, we must read the text carefully. The word used for 'dogs' has a better, and more accurate translation than 'dogs.' A better and more accurate translation would be 'little doggies.' This use of the word applies to dogs that would be household pets – which changes what Jesus is doing. To say 'dogs' would be an insult, because it means dirty animals, cast out animals... And by application the meaning becomes unacceptable people, or the wrong ethnic group. But the word by Mark, which is the same word used in Mathew's account of this story, is a rare diminutive and it is a word that is only used in these accounts in Mathew and Mark – nowhere else in the Bible.

It is used in books other than the Bible – in Greek it writes like Aristophanes, where it is a comical or playful word. And what's fascinating in this encounter, is that the woman summoning, no doubt, all her courage, throws it right back at Jesus. "That's as maybe" she says. "But even the little doggies get to eat the crumbs." Maybe another way of saying that might be: "I know your heart Jesus. By all means feed the children, but I think you have a crumb for me." Jesus appears delighted by her response and says, in effect, "Your daughter is healed – get out of here!"

For a moment it's important to dwell on the use of this word for dogs, which is better translated 'little doggies' because it holds a power that we might not otherwise see. The context of the word used in Mark for dogs in contemporary literature means: "Cute little dogs – or lap dogs."

Jesus is speaking Aramaic to the woman. He's a provincial Jew, who most likely has no experience of lap dogs. But the translator who translates from the Aramaic to the Greek does! And the translator understands that Jesus is saying something that leads them to use the word for cute little dogs here.

So, here's what's happening: Lap dogs, under the table in Greek literature, means they are getting the scraps at a joyous celebration or a very rich feast. An image of this from Greek literature at the time tells the story of a wedding banquet for a bride who had been kidnapped by fearsome kidnappers. She is a rich noble lady, so on her safe return, the whole town has a wild feast in celebration – this is the best thing that has ever happened. She is safe and now married. The dogs have a party too: under the table they are rendered helpless and bloated they have so much to eat.

In the ancient world this is an image of ultimate joy, set against the poverty that mostly prevailed at the time. At this celebration you feast, you eat meat... and for the dogs to get enough is simply amazing.

That's the story behind the story of this encounter between Jesus and a Syrophenician woman. What is in sight in this encounter is the banquet at the end of time (the eschatological banquet). Another way of saying that is that this story is a picture of the feasting in heaven at the end of time!

Jesus has effectively told this woman – she's included in the kingdom of the heavens. They, just like us, are reading that they, just like us, are also included in the kingdom of the heavens. They, and we, are heirs to the kingdom. At this banquet, the one in the kingdom of the heavens, the most ordinary of people

can imagine a banquet that never stops. It's a banquet at which no-one is lowly enough to be excluded and, perhaps, even more powerfully, it's a kingdom from which no-one is excluded now!

Far from being a meeting in which Jesus give a harsh response to a desperate woman, this is a tender meeting, one that brings hope not just to this woman, but to everyone. So, I'm wondering if the challenge before us this morning is something like this: What would our lives, and the life of the community of CBC look like if we reflected the truth of the kingdom of the heavens?

Love without limits?

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by Rev. Ian Phillips.