

After God's Heart

Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 5 Sept 2021

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Isaiah 35: 4-7a; Psalm 146; James 2: 1-10, 14-17; Mark 7: 24-37

+In the name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. AMEN.

What's it like to be a Church after God's heart? It means extending God's welcome to those who God sends us, even if sometimes it's a case of 'look who's coming to dinner.'

Today our Anglican Church of Australia is divided over whether God's welcome extends to LGBTQI people more or less on their terms, or only if they conform themselves to a very strict and narrow reading of the Bible. But, such hot button issues aside, I've known Anglican congregations that won't welcome people who don't look the part, or young adults, or even new people—because it's more comfortable and clubbier and predictable to stick with those you know. But today in our readings, as ever in our Eucharist, we encounter a God who loves God's people, the peoples of God's covenants, old and new, but who can't stop there—a God whose love is universal, so that our many blessings from God are meant to overflow. It's a love that

undercuts any sense of entitlement, any sense of our being insiders at the necessary expense of outsiders.

Today's Gospel gives us a window into how this issue played out in the middle of the first century, in the community where Mark's Gospel arose—the first Gospel to be written. We've just had a long passage in Mark Chapter 7 about the Pharisees and their zeal for Israel's law. Today all that gets turned upside down with two stories about Jesus' outreach to Gentiles: an Arab woman, and a deaf mute. These stories show a divided and struggling Church what Jesus did, or would have done, faced by the sort of alarming people who were turning up on the Church's doorstep. And so, if Jesus could welcome them, if Jesus could act after God's heart, then surely the Church could too.

Let's start with the latter, and easier, of the two cases: the deaf mute. We're told that Jesus comes to him via a circuitous route up and down and around Gentile territory. This was sure to get the hearers' attention! Then comes the shocking intimacy of Jesus' encounter with the deaf mute: up close and very personal, touching, and even exchanging bodily fluids. If Jesus could welcome the needy outsider like this, then surely the earliest Christians in Mark's community could reach out beyond their Jewish comfort zone and do likewise.

Then there's that Arab woman, a Canaanite or Syrophenician, one of the ancient enemies of God's people, now bowling up to Jesus bold as brass with a request for her daughter. The scene is an intentionally theatrical one. Jesus takes up the shocked rectitude of early Jewish Christians in his response to this woman: 'you can't give the children's food to the dogs.'

Now, you just can't soften this rebuke, though many well-intentioned interpreters have tried over the centuries. The best way to read this story, I think, is to see it as a programmatic statement of the earliest Church's prevailing attitude, put on the lips of Jesus for the sake of what comes next. Which is a very sassy reply from the woman: 'but even the dogs under the table can eat the children's' crumbs.'

Jesus doesn't comment on her faith in Mark's version of the story, he just gives in to someone who's bested him. 'OK, fair enough, he says,' and the woman's daughter is delivered. Jesus is presented as coming to a realisation, on behalf of the early Jewish Christians: that acting after God's heart means extending God's blessings upon Israel to a wider world when it comes seeking them. And if Jesus can get over his reluctance—if he can be charmed out of it in fact—then surely the Jewish Christians can be too. The blessings for Israel

promised in our Isaiah passage today, with the deaf hearing and the speechless praising God, are going viral thanks to Jesus and his Church. The universal reach of our world's creator stretches way beyond Zion, as our Psalm today testifies. And surely James is right in our epistle today, that faith after God's heart requires an active generosity from Christians—not to make ourselves acceptable to God by our works, but to show by our faithful works that strangers and aliens are as acceptable to God as we are.

One last thing. See how the Syrophenician woman is prepared to argue the case based on her own understanding of God. If God cares for Israel, she thinks, then surely you can stretch the logic so a little of that care is left over for others. So, with many Christians ever since, and still today, we rightly bridle whenever God is misrepresented as being harsh, vindictive and punishing—as an obsessive divine bureaucrat, perhaps, obsessed with rules at the expense of people. In the same way, we're onto it when craven political self-preservation is dressed up as high principle, as we see in Australia's shameful treatment of asylum seekers. We know in our bones that God can't mean for things to be like that, because we've come to know a different God in word and sacrament. And even if the Church as a whole hasn't always caught up with these generous insights, individual Christians and congregations certainly have, and they act accordingly.

I'm not talking about wokeness here—about that trendy rush to overthrow every convention, every tradition. I'm simply talking about the sanctified instinct that Christians develop because they've come to know Jesus. Someone once said that Jesus wasn't a liberal, he was just compassionate. That's what it's like for the Church to be after God's heart.

The Lord be with you ...