

**Worcester Cathedral – 20 August 2023,
11th Sunday after Trinity – Eucharist 10.30 pm**

Readings: Isaiah 56. 1, 6-8; Romans 11. 1-2a, 29-32;
Matt. 15. 21-28

Whosoever will, may come.

- Well, isn't this is shocking? A poor Canaanite woman desperate for the healing of her daughter causes Jesus disciples to be angry at her importunity, and Jesus to apparently class her as a dog compared to the Jews.
- Is this possible? Is this the Jesus who taught through the parable of the Good Samaritan that care and love should be unconditional, and know no religious or racial bias?
- Is this the Jesus who says 'Come to me all you who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest?
- This language reminds us of similar language used of asylum seekers by some politicians.
- Surely, we begin to wonder whether this is an accurate historical portrayal.
- The gospels were written down decades after Jesus' death and represent memories of his life and teaching. We all know how such memories are influenced by subsequent experience.
- What's more most scholars do not think that author was Matthew the disciple so the account must represent hearsay influenced by the author's views as to Jesus' mission.
- Reading Matthew's gospel there is an emphasis on proving that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. Was the memory of this incident influenced by the author's desire to demonstrate that Jesus' mission was to show himself as the Messiah to the Jews as foretold by the prophets?
- Perhaps this Matthew wanted to underline that although the woman through her clever persistence got her way, this was an exception to Jesus' real mission, that was primarily to the people of Israel?
- But did Jesus really treat the woman in the way described?
- Some would say well this is what the Bible says it must be true, but is it reasonable to think that all we read is historically accurate?

- In 1985 a group of 50 Biblical scholars got together to try to decide what aspects of the gospel record revealed the historical Jesus. They called themselves the Jesus Seminar.
- On the basis of the overall character of Jesus revealed in the gospels they looked at each incident and piece of teaching to try to decide whether they were consistent with what Jesus actually did and said or whether the account was influenced by author bias or mistaken memory.
- This is not an easy task, and a voting process was used and of course that is open to criticism. They voted on each incident or saying attributed to Jesus.
- There were 5 categories – those that a majority thought were certainly by Jesus, those that were probably by Jesus, those that might or might not be due to Jesus, those that were probably not due to Jesus and those that were definitely not down to Jesus.
- This incident came into the last category! The Jesus Seminar did not think that this story was part of Jesus' historical experience.
- It is not to say the meeting with this needy gentile woman did not occur, just that it does not reflect Jesus actual actions and words.
- The gospel writer was perhaps so concerned to show that Jesus teaching and ministry was for the Jews not the gentiles.
- He did not want any dilution of that message. Any benefits for the gentiles were as crumbs under the table for dogs. Nevertheless, for the record the gospel writer does allow Jesus to be impressed by the woman's great faith.
- The epistle to the Romans from which we read earlier was probably written before the gospels shows that the idea that Jesus' message was primarily for the Jews was a live issue in the early church, so it is not surprising that the gospels written at this time reflect this. Although the argument is convoluted, Paul is clear the gospel is for all peoples.
- By the time the gospels were written the small gatherings of Christians were becoming institutionalised, concerned with who was in and who was out and how that was defined.
- So belief and theology starts to play a role in the criteria for membership of the developing community.
- In the minds of some if the Jesus teaching was really only for the Jews, then the new church was limited to Jews and their behaviour was very influenced by Jewish traditions.
- Peter got seduced by this way of thinking and in his letter to the Galatians Paul had to show that this was the antithesis of the gospel. (Galatians 2)

- While it is obvious that as the church grew some sort of organisation was necessary it is sad that institutionalisation seems to inevitably require belief based barriers to be set up.
- Jesus' life and teaching was based on a deep relationship with the Father that spilled out in relation-based action and teaching.
- He called on his disciples to follow him in love and service to all they lived with.
- Love God with all your being and your neighbour as yourself.
- The beatitudes were his manifesto. Jesus did not call on us to worship him, but a great deal of the church's effort has gone into beliefism.
- Who is allowed in, who can and cannot lead and participate in worship, the correct form and words of worship.
- Think of all the effort that our Church has expended over the ordination of women and the acceptance that sexuality should not be a bar to ministry, although that is still not fully resolved.
- Consider who is and is not welcome to take communion. There are barriers on this topic all over the Christian church that are inimical to following Jesus.
- It is so sad, it is not the detail of what you believe or how you worship, according to Jesus all that is required is to take up your cross and follow him.
- That's the rub! It seems to be far more important, even easier to organise the institution with appropriate hierarchy, and arrange worship with good music etc than to live out the Beatitudes.
- Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the Sons of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.
- To live in peace and compassion for all. That is our calling. How we need the church to demonstrate that to our divided world where barriers multiply with all the resulting inhumanity and active aggression.
- John Lennon's 1971 song 'Imagine', expressed the longing of countless millions:
- Ah
- Imagine there's no countries

- It isn't hard to do
- Nothing to kill or die for
- And no religion, too
- Imagine all the people
- Livin' life in peace
- You may say I'm a dreamer
- But I'm not the only one
- I hope someday you'll join us
- And the world will be as one
- Imagine no possessions
- I wonder if you can
- No need for greed or hunger
- A brotherhood of man
- Imagine all the people
- Sharing all the world
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- You may say I'm a dreamer
- But I'm not the only one I hope someday you'll join us
- And the world will live as one.
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- It is so sad when religion gets so institutionalised that human beings substitute control and structure for the essence of the faith and the love that is its basis.
- So Lennon sees religion as part of the problem, indeed in this regard I think Jesus would agree. A world in which the Beatitudes are the basis of life would be one at peace.
- John Lennon's dream is the world that is Jesus' dream and will be the new heaven and new earth.
- Imagine all the people living life in peace. You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will be as one."
- Jesus' life and message is that God loves all of us - no exclusions, and we are on the way to a new heaven and a new earth.
- Although sadly most of the time it doesn't feel like it.
- It is over 50 years since John Lennon dreamed his dream. It is over 2000 years since Jesus proclaimed his vision. The world doesn't seem to get any closer to the fulfilment of those dreams.
- Maybe it is because the Beatitudes are not our principal focus?

- Where they are, maybe we glimpse a little of the new heaven and new earth even here in our Community?
- Is the Eco group with its concern to preserve and enhance our little part of the planet pointing us toward the new earth?
- Is the pastoral care that is going on amongst us, however imperfectly, pointing the way to the new heaven?
- Perhaps we can rejoice that God is working his purposes out even amongst us!
- To follow Jesus is not easy, his values are completely at variance with the values of our world, but the incarnation shows that Jesus walks with us. 'Low I am with you until the end of the age,' when the new heaven and new earth will be revealed.
- At the end of the book of Revelation we hear the words: And let those who are thirsty come. And whosoever will, let them take the water of life freely. (Revelation 22:17)
- Whosoever - **No exclusions**, as a foretaste of the new heaven and new earth come experience the love of Christ as we share bread and wine and go out to share his love with others as he did with the Canaanite woman that day.
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- Amen