

Trinity XIV 2021

The Holy Land is different from anywhere else that I have been. It is an extraordinary to walk in parts of the Old City of Jerusalem where Jesus and the disciples would have met. Venturing further afield and going up to the lake of Galilee and the north of the country is also fascinating.

On my first visit, over thirty years ago, travel was relatively easy but on more recent visits it had become far more difficult. Walls and road blocks are a feature of the landscape as the Israelis restrict the movement of the Palestinians. Bethlehem, which was once easy to get to from Jerusalem is now very difficult to enter.

On one occasion, I drove back from Nazareth to Jerusalem in the dark. We were stopped frequently and initially regarded with suspicion by the soldiers at the road blocks.

In today's gospel, Jesus has undertaken a journey that many Jews would have regarded with similar suspicion. He has gone to Tyre, which was regarded by the Jews as the epitome of unfaithfulness and pride – a sort of first century Las Vegas.

Jesus was confronted by a situation which would have made him very uncomfortable and which would have been viewed by others with suspicion.

A Gentile woman, a Syro-Phoenician, asked him to heal her daughter. She bowed to him, which doesn't seem odd to us but in Jesus' time men who bowed to another man conferred honour. The opposite was true if a woman did so – if a woman bowed to a man she brought disgrace upon him.

Moreover, her pleading for her daughter was inappropriate: a woman was not to plead with a man for her daughter, since she was expected to have a husband who would put the case for her.

Further, it was not done for a rabbi – and Jesus was regarded as a rabbi – to speak directly to a woman. So, *several taboos have been broken.*

But this woman succeeds in compelling Jesus's attention. She sets up a tension between the obligation to look after the widow and orphan (though for Jews this duty only applied to the plight of fellow Jews) and the custom that rabbis should not speak to women.

Their conversation uses language which is quite violent to our ears. Jesus, in effect, calls her a dog – unpleasantly close to our ears to very rude slang that adolescent boys might sometimes apply to girls. Really horrible and shocking language.

More is going on here than we quite realise. In Jewish society, dogs wandered the streets as there were no pet dogs. Only in Gentile society (that is non-Jewish society) were dogs kept as domestic pets, able to wander around the table hoping for scraps of food at mealtimes.

The woman cleverly refers to this in saying that even the dogs are allowed scraps. Jesus appreciates this and, in so doing, expands the range of his ministry and audience to include the Gentiles.

Strikingly, he does not even go to the sick daughter to heal her. At the end of his conversation with the woman, he simply informs her that the healing has happened. He then travels south by a circuitous route.

Jesus' behaviour in the next healing story is in sharp contrast to the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. *With the woman, Jesus wants to establish distance, but with the deaf man Jesus plunges into a very physical healing.*

Both stories show Jesus' willingness to break down barriers. They establish a standard, a template, for the way Christian communities should behave. However, it is easy for us individually and collectively to shrink from doing so. It's easy to pass by the people begging outside the shops every day.

Another trivial example arises in this building when it's open to the public. Visitors have a knack for arriving just as I hope to lock the church and go home. I may force oneself into friendliness and politeness but inwardly I groan and hope to return home as soon as possible.

I am just trying to outline some of the less than admirable things that I find myself doing and I imagine that others feel drawn into as well. But it happens at the communal level as well. I remember in my first parish going for a day's retreat – really a time for reflection and discussion, not a silent retreat – and the perennial topic of how to attract more people came up. What was fascinating – not to say disillusioning – was that quickly after raising the topic some made it quite clear that the arrival of new people would not lead them to changing anything that they were familiar with.

But this is unrealistic, we cannot really relate to other people without influencing them and their influencing us. Although there may have been reluctance, Jesus discovered this when he encountered the Syro-Phoenician woman: she challenged his initial rejection and he healed her child.

Believing as a Christian is not simply a matter of having a comfortable life in relation to God, or just going to church and doing the same thing every week and feeling pleased with ourselves for doing so. The reading from the letter of James makes it quite clear that faith without works – that is sitting pretty in our relationship with God and having nothing to show for it – is dead. So, when we hear the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman we should be prompted to engage individually with the people we encounter and, as a community, we should always remain open to newcomers and the impact that they can have on us, as well as the impact that we might have on them.

However, this is simply to engage with the implications of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman at a personal and community level: its range is greater than this. I believe that it applies more to what is happening now and is often described as the greatest crisis of migration since the Second World War and its aftermath - the millions trying to escape war and oppression. The latest instance obviously is Afghanistan. Over 120,000 were airlifted – the largest such operation of its kind ever attempted. They have to go somewhere.

The issue is complex but millions of people have been displaced in recent years. Before Afghanistan, four million people have fled Syria alone. As well as Muslims, among these are Christians, as there are among those escaping persecution in Iraq and in those territories occupied by IS.

Some will argue that this forced migration is the result of US and UK involvement in the Second Iraq War (and in the occupation of Afghanistan for twenty years). Others will argue that – with 40% of those fleeing being graduates and many European economies stagnating – their migration offers great economic benefits. Particularly, many in Germany have seen this as an opportunity to welcome rather than reject people and lay the ghost of the terrors of the 1930s. On the other hand, some politicians will be wary of the nationalist movements in their countries which thrive on xenophobia. [As I said, the issue is complex and I have no desire as a preacher to coerce you into one view.]

However, as Christians, we cannot ignore this gospel passage and the teaching of Jesus. It is not a dead letter: Jesus crossed barriers of ethnicity and welcomed and healed the stranger. In many accounts in the New Testament, most of all in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus taught this. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, it was not the official and respectable representatives of Jewish society – the priest and the Levi – but the outsider, the Samaritan, from a people whom the Jews despised, who did the right thing and tended to the needs of the man who had been mugged.

The people who risk crossing the sea, the people milling at the borders of the EU states, are not coming here on a whim. Like the Syro-Phoenician woman they are desperate. Just as she challenged Jesus' assertion that his mission was only to his own people, the migrants (outsiders to us as the Syro-Phoenician woman was to Jesus) challenge us to respond. And, if we are to follow Jesus' example, we also must engage and offer healing.