

Sunday Thought

5th September 2021 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

Proverbs 22: 1 – 2, 8 – 9, 22 – 23

Psalm 125

James 2: 1 – 10, 14 – 17

Mark 7: 24 – 37

Count me in!



I am sure that, with me, everyone has been thinking about the heart-wrenching events in Afghanistan this week. Those happenings have raised issues in our thoughts and conversations which are also highlighted in today's scripture readings – about justice – priorities – race – religion – merit – the value of individual lives and this overall question of inclusion. Even the words of a Syrian woman in the gospel connect with one debatable rescue flight

from Kabul airport – *even the dogs have a share in the banquet!* I have always had questions about that story as Mark tells it – *were the 'twelve' with Jesus on his visit to Syria? – who was the anonymous person he went there to see? – what did he mean by let's feed the children first?* There was obviously a deeper understanding behind that conversation.

Reading these scriptures with world events in the background and thinking of the Methodist Conference's determination to create a more inclusive church, one word stood out for me – *'first'*. I think that Mark in his account was making an important point about priorities and inclusion, showing clearly, Jesus' resistance to all prejudice.

Close to the city of Tyre, as a Jew Jesus was in some respects 'a foreigner'. Was that why he did not take the disciples along? On the other hand, if the woman had been able to travel to Galilee with her sick daughter she may well have been identified as a 'foreigner' as well as 'a woman' and her daughter, with her obvious health problems, seen as 'demon possessed'. I am not sure they could have assumed having a place at the front of Jesus' rescue queue? May we not assume that the reason Jesus went to Syria was to help them and maybe at a neighbour's request? Mark continues his story with Jesus' return to Galilee. He travelled back through the Decapolis which was a confederation of ten Greek-styled cities east of the river Jordan. It was a majority Gentile area where Jesus attracted great crowds. It was the scene of many of his miracles. Mark tells how Jesus met a man who was deaf and had difficulty speaking – another excluded character, despised by many who did not understand his 'infirmity' and even attributed it to the work of devils.

Jesus took the man apart, alone from the crowd. That was, as Mark points out, to detract from his popularity as a miracle-worker. Jesus' priority was to share with Gentiles as well as Jews his message about changing their lives for God and living the way of his Kingdom. Get that right and miracles follow!

These stories suggest that Jesus may have had some 'private practice' work in his ministry, not for personal gain but out of true care for the people who needed him. Not everyone who came wanted to be 'treated' in front of the crowd, nor did Jesus want them to keep drawing attention to his miracles instead of his teaching. Nevertheless, all were welcome.

That message was largely embraced by the early church. James' letter puts it plainly. There should be no discrimination in church or in Christian life. There are to be no judgements on grounds of race, worship practices, sexuality, wealth, disadvantage, or appearance. All are welcome.

It seems I have been carried away by many thoughts this Sunday. But by one above all others. These gospel events are a testimony to the wonder of The Incarnation – God entering our world in Jesus. God takes the initiative, mostly coming to us before we are able or ready to reach out to him. So, these are wonderful illustrations of God's gracious love in giving Jesus to the world. It's all about inclusion! He is in the world to include me – and you – and everyone – in God's loving purpose! But, at the same time he comes *to be included*. We are called as the church to ensure that '*all are welcome*' but inclusion is two-way. The church – as a body and as individuals – must be included in the lives of those all around us who need him too and ready, as he is, to go to them.

It is possible to feel excluded because we have never been invited.



Enjoy the proverbs, by the way. There are many more 'thoughts' there. We should spend time with those life-illuminating words like '*Poor and rich, God made us both!*'

A Prayer [with Psalm 125 in mind]

Lord God, in a world of so much injustice, when it seems
Sickness is not healed, prisoners are not freed,
The disadvantaged sit alone, the troubled find no peace
And the spiritually hungry are not satisfied
We are comforted to know we are secure in your gracious embrace.
We are challenged too, to share our assurance
and bring others to know your amazing inclusive love.

