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Service for the 14th Sunday after Trinity, 5th September 2021

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us say to one another: "Be strong. Do not fear. God, our God, is here with us."
Come with your fears, your doubts, your anxiety. Come just as you are.
You are welcome in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

HYMN: New every morning

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

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|---|--|
| 1. New every morning is the love
our wakening and uprising prove,
through sleep and darkness safely brought,
restored to life and power and thought. | 3. If on our daily course our mind
be set to hallow all we find,
new treasures still, of countless price,
God will provide for sacrifice. |
| 2. New mercies each returning day,
hover around us while we pray;
new perils past, new sins forgiven,
new thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven. | 4. Old friends, old scenes, will lovelier be,
as more of heaven in each we see,
some softening gleam of love and prayer
shall dawn on every cross and care. |
| 5. The trivial round, the common task
will furnish all we ought to ask.
Lord, help us, this and every day,
to live more nearly as we pray. | |

John Keble

PRAYER

Let us pray

Welcoming God, you invite us to worship you and to be together. Sustain us with your presence, nourish us with your word, strengthen us in your service and send us out to live every day of our lives in your name.

Lord God, we come to you in so many different ways. We may jump for joy at being in your presence; or we may shamble in, weighed down by the cares of our world.

The Gentile woman, overcome with worry about her daughter, fell at your feet and pleaded with you. The deaf man had the people of Decapolis to plead for his healing.

God of miracles, however we are feeling, we come to meet you, expectant and hopeful.

Whether we are one or many and whatever our station in life, you welcome us with arms wide open – and we worship you, Lord God of all.

All-inclusive and ever-loving God, we praise and adore you. With you there is no south or north, no east or west – no borders. You care for each one of us.

You are a healing God, who heals us wherever and whenever we need your touch – whether in body, mind or spirit. We look upon you now, our hearts ablaze with love for you.

Forgive us, Lord, for all the times we are too quick to form opinions, too quick to judge others; the times we don't give people the benefit of the doubt, or fail to consider what they might be going through. Open our eyes to see and our ears to listen, as you do.

Lord God of healing, we thank you for the different ways you answer our prayers. The Gentile woman wasn't frightened to answer you back – and you knew she was right. We thank you for the power of words.

The deaf man had the confidence in you to jump up and receive your healing. We thank you for the power of actions that speak louder than words. Thank you that you are available to each one of us who truly believes.

Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

Mark 7: 24-37

²⁴Then Jesus left and went away to the territory near the city of Tyre. He went into a house and did not want anyone to know he was there, but he could not stay hidden. ²⁵A woman, whose daughter had an evil spirit in her, heard about Jesus and came to him at once and fell at his feet. ²⁶The woman was a Gentile, born in the region of Phoenicia in Syria. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷But Jesus answered, "Let us first feed the children. It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

²⁸"Sir," she answered, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers!"

²⁹So Jesus said to her, "Because of that answer, go back home, where you will find that the demon has gone out of your daughter!" ³⁰She went home and found her child lying on the bed; the demon had indeed gone out of her.

³¹Jesus then left the neighbourhood of Tyre and went on through Sidon to Lake Galilee, going by way of the territory of the Ten Towns. ³²Some people brought him a man who was deaf and could hardly speak, and they begged Jesus to place his hands on him. ³³So Jesus took him off alone, away from the crowd, put his fingers in the man's ears, spat, and

touched the man's tongue. ³⁴Then Jesus looked up to heaven, gave a deep groan, and said to the man, "Ephphatha," which means, "Open up!"

³⁵At once the man was able to hear, his speech impediment was removed, and he began to talk without any trouble. ³⁶Then Jesus ordered the people not to speak of it to anyone; but the more he ordered them not to, the more they spoke. ³⁷And all who heard were completely amazed. "How well he does everything!" they exclaimed. "He even causes the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak!"

Thanks be to God.

ADDRESS: *Mr Geof Owen*

Testing Times?

A lot rides on how you interpret Jesus' surprising reaction to the request of the Syrophenician woman. Okay, 'surprising' is an understatement. How about 'downright rude'? After all, she comes to him bowed down, in the posture of worship, begging that he cure her daughter of an unclean spirit, something we already know he can easily do. Yet he brushes her off, refusing her request and casting her aside, throwing in an ethnic slur just for good measure. The haunting question is, *why?*

Here's the traditional answer to this question: he is not actually refusing her but rather testing her. So the rebuff, the insult, the rejection – these aren't real at all but rather the means by which to test her faith, to see if she really, really believes in him. Of course, she passes.

The trouble with this interpretation is that [a] nothing like it occurs anywhere else in the Gospel of Mark, [b] there is no mention of testing in the story (as there is in Job, for instance), and [c] it creates a rather cold-hearted picture of a God who taunts and tests us in our deepest moments of need.

If not this interpretation, then what? Why on earth would Jesus react to someone in need in such a callous manner? Here is an untraditional answer to this question: perhaps, just perhaps, Jesus had not yet realized the full extent of God's mission or the radical nature of the kingdom he proclaimed.

I know that's a somewhat uncomfortable conclusion to reach. We want to think of Jesus as full-bodied, perfect, and immutable from birth, like Athena springing full-grown from the head of Zeus. But if we are to take Mark's narrative seriously, never mind the incarnational and creedal affirmation that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, then perhaps we should not be surprised to see a development in Jesus' own recognition of God's vision for the world. After all, the profoundly expansive notion of a kingdom that included *everyone* – no exceptions! – was completely and totally novel... and still is!

If so – if we can imagine that this woman didn't simply pass a clever test but instead, and as Jesus himself says, demonstrated profound faith – then we might acknowledge that this

brave mother actually taught the Teacher and, therefore, might have some things to teach us as well.

Two things in particular stand out. First, she teaches us about the power of the stranger. Newcomers, strangers – people who are different from us – stretch our perspective and teach us things about themselves, about the world, and about us; but only if we will listen. While from time to time you will meet persons as bold – or desperate – as is the woman in this story, who will offer their insight to us unprompted, more often these folks sit at the margins of our faith communities if they enter the door at all.

So we will need to reach out to them and convince them that we care about their opinion. So one question might be to ask – both now in this address and in future Elders' Meetings – whom are we overlooking? Who is a part of our fellowship but does not often participate, does not sit at the centre, is not enfranchised but might have a great deal to teach us.

Second, this woman teaches us about the nature of faith. While it's tempting to see this story as one of self-actualization – the woman not only believed in Jesus but also and more importantly believed in herself – I'm not sure that's the case at all. I have no idea whether this woman believed herself worthy of God's attention and Jesus' time, but I do know that she believed her daughter was worthy. That is, she was convinced that her precious, beloved daughter who was being oppressed by this unclean spirit was absolutely deserving of Jesus' attention. So she was willing to go to great lengths to help her, even to the point of arguing with this famous teacher and healer.

I think that's often the case with faith. It shows itself most fully when exercised on behalf of others. This isn't to say that I'm against self-affirmation and actualization – indeed, I think the promises of baptism are among the most affirming and life giving there are in the world. Rather, it's simply to say that we are not created to be isolated beings but rather find our true selves most deeply in community, in relationship, and when we are advocating for another.

I want to invite you, our congregation, our fellowship, to imagine that we will be renewed in mission and energy and spirit when – and I'm tempted to say “*only when*” – we identify those persons around us who need our advocacy and care. I am convinced that congregational renewal does not come from figuring out what hymns we – that is, those still attending – want to sing, what programmes we most want, or what Minister we really deserve. Rather, congregational renewal comes when we look around us – to our households, schools, communities, and world – to discern who needs us, what they need from us, and how we might leverage our resources to be their advocates before God and the world.

I once belonged to a church that did just that in the 1960s. I'm talking about Wednesbury Road Congregational Church, now the Glebe Centre. We demolished the 19th century church and halls so we could have a building that was more useful for the work we were about to embark on.

Most of you will know what we found – and the needs we found then are, in many ways, still the needs today. That doesn't mean we failed. It means that institutions failed, the

government, the local authority, and perhaps even some national charities; but those needs are still being met by YMCA who now run the Centre. Just because I'm no longer at the centre of the operation doesn't mean I can forget about it and leave it to others. There are still things I'm involved in – such as ensuring people know what the needs are – and I willingly collect donations of all sorts of items to take there.

Elsewhere in Mark's Gospel, Jesus says that only those who give away their life will find it. I think that's true both in our individual and congregational experience, and I think Jesus first learned just how true that is from this fiercely loving mother.

HYMN: Let us build a house

*If you would like to **listen** to this hymn, click the icon on the webpage or the link below:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKJqcv8SdnQ>

PRAYERS of intercession

Let us pray

Loving God, who rescues us and restores us, we think of those who need your help today. We pray especially for those who feel ignored, those whose problems are swept under the mat, whose cries for help are downplayed or devalued.

We pray for those who feel they do not have a place to belong, a safe place to find support and friendship.

We pray for those in situations of captivity, in whatever sense of the word, for those who cannot see a way through the darkness, for those who feel their lives are in pieces.

We ask that you would touch their lives, that they may know you as healer and as friend. As for us, make us their advocates and their champions; where the world has abandoned them, help us walk beside them, showing your love to all who need it, in Jesus' name.

We regularly sit at a table and share in a feast where even the remnants of what we enjoy are far more than many people even dream of to relieve their despair. We laden our table with 'treats' denied to many: love, justice, acceptance, wisdom, truth, security. These are not commodities to be protected from our neighbours, for the feast can only truly begin when all guests take their God-given place.

The answer to "when?", "where?", "who?" and "how?" bear no "ifs", "ands" or "buts".

If our actions do not speak this truth, how can we claim the name of the One who cries justice for the undesired and excluded? Please help us, Lord, to welcome all - not just the impressively cloaked, or those with a pass to our Comfort Zone.

Open our ears to hear the fullness of your message, and let your cry be lived out in us.

Amen.

HYMN: King of glory

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1. King of glory, King of peace,
I will love thee;
and, that love may never cease,
I will move thee.
Thou hast granted my request,
thou hast heard me,
thou didst note my working breast,
thou hast spared me.

2. Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing thee,
and the cream of all my heart
I will bring thee.
Though my sins against me cried,
thou didst clear me;
and alone, when they replied,
thou didst hear me.

3. Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise thee;
in my heart, though not in heaven,
I can raise thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort
to enrol thee;
ev'n eternity's too short
to extol thee.

George Herbert

BLESSING

Let us pray

God of salvation, you open the way to life by offering us unconditional love.
We rejoice in our freedom, our healing and our hope.
Teach us to be open to others, to offer welcome, and practise inclusion; in Jesus' name,
Amen.