

ST ANDREW'S, LONDON ROAD & PARTRIDGE GREEN METHODIST CHURCHES
WORSHIP AT HOME MATERIALS FOR SUNDAY 5TH SEPTEMBER 2021

CALL TO WORSHIP

As we start our new Connexional year
May your priorities be ours
May your values be ours
May your challenges be ours,
May your love be ours
That we might dedicate this year
to you and your service.

Amen.¹

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS JUSTICE AND JOY;

For Jesus restores what sin would destroy.
God's power and glory in Jesus we know;
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace;
The captives are freed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share;
And hope is awakened in place of despair.

The kingdom of God is challenge and choice:
Believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
God's love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross:
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal;
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole.
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call;
And all things cry "Glory!" to God all in all.

Bryn Rees (1911-1983)

OPENING PRAYERS

In January, at the start of a new year, we look back
and we look forward.
We think back over the year that has passed, all that
took place, the good and the bad.
We think ahead to the year yet to come, make
resolutions of how things will be different,
and make fresh starts.
Today, on the first Sunday of a new Connexional year,
We do the same.
So we praise God:
For all in the last year that brought joy,
For all moments when we felt close to God,
For times we glimpsed God working in our world,
For opportunities seized and new initiatives started.
We take time, in silence, to bring before God
all from the last year for which we give thanks and
praise.

¹ Call to Worship written by Melissa Quinn

Silence

And we say together:

Thank you Lord, that as the mountains surround
Jerusalem,
you surround your people forever more.
But we also recognize that there were times in the
last year that we lament, both things that happened
to us or around us, and our own behaviours and
attitudes.

So we bring before God:

The times when our actions did not glorify you,
The words we said that were harmful or unnecessary,
All in the last year that caused pain and anguish to
ourselves or others, Opportunities wasted and
moments lost.

We take time, in silence, to bring before God
all from the last year for which we ask forgiveness
and lament.

Silence

And we say together:

Thank you Lord, that as the mountains surround
Jerusalem, you surround your people forever more.
Lord hear our thanksgiving and praise, our
confessions and lamentations, and help us to hear
your forgiveness and start afresh.

In the year that is to come:

May we experience joy and bring joy to others,
May we feel your presence close to us,
May we glimpse you at work in our world,
May we seize opportunities to show your love to
others.

May our actions glorify you May our words talk of
your love,
May we speak into the pain and anguish of others,
And may we trust in you to be beside us in ours.
Lord we give to you the year that is passed, and the
year that is to come, and offer it to you.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen.²

WE SAY TOGETHER THE LORD'S PRAYER

JESU, JESU, FILL US WITH YOUR LOVE

*show us how to serve the neighbours we have from
you.*

Kneels at the feet of his friends,
silently washes their feet,

² Opening prayers written by Melissa Quinn

Master who acts as a slave to them.

Jesu, Jesu...

Neighbors are wealthy and poor,
varied in color and race,
neighbors are near us and far away.

Jesu, Jesu...

These are the ones we should serve,
these are the ones we should love,
all these are neighbors to us and you.

Jesu, Jesu...

Loving puts us on our knees,
silently washing their feet,
this is the way we should live with you.

Jesu, Jesu...

North Ghanaian song adapted by Tom Colvin (1925-2000)

SCRIPTURES:

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-10 &
Mark 7:24-37

REFLECTIONS ON THE READING

Has anyone ever said to you, 'I wish I had your faith'? How did that make you feel? Or perhaps you have looked at someone else in the church, or online, or on Songs of Praise and thought to yourself, 'If only I had faith like that'?

One thing we might discover, if a conversation continued from such comments, is that we all mean something different by faith. We are not alone in that, for the various writers in the Bible also seem to have different understandings of faith and use the word in different ways.

When we read this passage from the letter of James, we may be surprised, even shocked, to find the little question in verse 14, 'Can faith save you?' to which James appears to expect the answer, 'No', while we might be shouting 'Yes, it's the only thing that can'! In our minds are many passages from the letters of Paul which hold up our faith in Christ to be a saving faith, the vital element of our discipleship. Yet here James seems to rubbish faith in favour of 'works' – practical action taken to help others in the name of Christ. So what are we to think?

Before we go any further, please also notice one of the dangers of headings in our bibles... some versions (not all) try to help us through the text by adding titles to chapters or paragraphs; which are not always as helpful as they are intended to be. A case in point is with the Gospel passage for today which in several

versions is entitled 'The Syrophenician Woman's Faith'. But read the text closely again, nowhere is the word 'Faith' mentioned, not in Mark. When Matthew tells the story (Matthew 18:21-28) he does relate Jesus saying, 'Woman, great is your faith...'. But Mark doesn't.

I don't want us to get bogged down in the differences between these two accounts and what that might mean (nor in a full examination of the different ways in which James and Paul use the word 'faith') but I do want to allow Mark to tell the story his way – with no mention of faith at all, because in fact, I find that a helpful approach.

From Mark we learn several things about this woman:

- Despite the fact that Jesus was trying to keep a low profile, she heard about him and came to him.
- She was a Gentile, in other words, not Jewish, and came from Syrophenicia – this links her with the Canaanites of the Old Testament, with all the preconceptions about their heathen practices.
- She had a sick daughter – so, we may assume, she was desperate.
- She believed the sickness to be caused by a demon, so she asks Jesus to cast it out.
- He refuses on what appear to be racist grounds – inferring that, in comparison to the Jews, who were understood to be the children of God, she is a dog – harsh words. Harsher-sounding, perhaps, when we read them in the English translation, for the Greek word here is closer to 'puppies', maybe even with a hint of affection, 'dear little puppies'. Nevertheless, it still doesn't sound like a compliment!
- The woman is quick-witted; rather than be rebuffed by the apparent insult, she argues back. Perhaps from her own experience as a mother she knows that when children eat, small children anyway, some food falls to the ground – can't she and her daughter at least be given the crumbs?
- Mark may be linking his telling of this story with the miraculous feeding of the crowds which took place in the previous chapter – there he told us that there were many baskets of left-overs; who might they have been intended to feed if not a woman and her child such as this?
- Anyway, the woman's quick response finds its mark, Jesus concedes the truth of her interpretation as he responds, 'For that saying, you may go – the demon has left your daughter'.

- The woman returns home and finds that to be the case.

The story leaves us with more questions than it answers; why did Jesus initially refuse, and in such terms? Of course we cannot hear his tone of voice as he speaks with this woman (and the fact that he does speak with her at all indicates a willingness to tear up the rule book; as a woman and a foreigner, she was taking huge risks in approaching Jesus, and probably would not have been surprised had he blanked her completely). So we don't know if there is a twinkle in his eye, or a gentle curiosity in his voice as he engages her in conversation.

What we do know is that in the end the woman receives what she longs for, the healing of her daughter. And that there is no mention of faith. Perhaps Mark was reluctant to talk about the woman's 'faith' when she was a Gentile with a different cultural heritage; if we were to see her as a woman of faith, what exactly would that mean?

Which takes us back to where we began; what does it really mean when others notice faith in you, or you notice faith in others? After my teenage son, Peter, died in 2012, many people said to me, 'Your faith will see you through'. I know they meant well by this but I confess I found it a very difficult remark to hear. What if I didn't have enough faith? At a time in my life when everything felt fragile, how could I summon up enough faith to 'see me through'? At a time when I was weak and lacking in energy and courage, this all sounded like very hard work. One of the most helpful revelations of my entire life came one Sunday morning when I suddenly realised that it was not my faith which would sustain me and my family, it was God's grace – and for that I had to do nothing at all, except receive.

Perhaps that is why I caution us all against talking too much about faith; for one thing, we never know what someone else means by that, as James and Paul demonstrate! For another, it puts the focus on us, instead of on God... Surely today's story from Mark's gospel speaks primarily of the grace of God, shown in the compassion of Jesus who reaches out beyond all the acceptable behaviour and religious limitations of his day and heals this child? Hallelujah!

Of course it follows that our lives are lived in response to God's grace; we are not puppets carried along on a tide of divine goodness with no control

over what we do or how we live. The psalmist knew this, and Psalm 125 speaks of the confidence and immovability of those who 'trust in the Lord' – perhaps the Syrophenician

woman knew more of the tenets of Jewish faith than we might suppose for she exemplifies the words of the psalm 'which cannot be moved'.

James is correct in exhorting us to live out our response to God's grace in acts of mercy and compassion – we who know what it is to have received grace must become those who offer grace at every opportunity – even, as Jesus himself seems to have come to understand in this passage – to those at the back of the queue.

Mark moves straight on from the story of the woman and her child to tell of the healing of a deaf man whose speech too was impaired. The man is healed and is able to speak 'plainly' and the reading ends with more and more enthusiastic witnessing to Jesus who 'has done everything well'. God's grace is attractive, infectious and news-worthy; we too, in reading and hearing these stories, are 'astounded beyond measure' – to whom can we speak today of the wonders of God's grace?³

WHAT ARE YOU BEING CALLED TO?

For our time of reflection, we return to the opening question from today's reflection.

Has anyone ever said to you, 'I wish I had your faith'? How did that make you feel? Or perhaps you have looked at someone else in the church, or online, or on Songs of Praise and thought to yourself, 'If only I had faith like that'?

Take some time to reflect on stories like these, and how your attitude to 'faith' is changed by reflecting on today's readings.

LET US PRAY.

God of all grace, we give you thanks that we are always accepted and loved, no matter what our story, no matter how strong we feel our faith is. Move amongst us, by your grace, today, Lord God. Amen.

SHOW ME HOW TO STAND FOR JUSTICE

How to work for what is right,
How to challenge false assumptions,
How to walk within the light.
May I learn to share more freely
In a world so full of greed,

³ Reflection written by Jill Baker

Showing your immense compassion
By the life I choose to lead.

Teach my heart to treasure mercy,
Whether given or received
For my need has not diminished
Since the day I first believed.
Let me seek no satisfaction
Boasting of what I have done.
But rejoice that I am pardoned
And accepted in your Son.

Gladly I embrace a lifestyle
Modelled on your living word,
In humility submitting
To the truth that I have heard;
Make me conscious of your presence
Every day in all I do:
By your Spirit's gracious prompting
May I learn to walk with you.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

As the Syrophenician woman challenged Jesus, May we also to challenge the priorities of the world...
Help us not to accept how things are, but to fight for Jesus' Kingdom values.

- Fight for a fairer distribution of the world's resources,
- Fight for a world without hunger and need,
- Fight for the most marginalized and desperate,
- Fight for an end to actual fighting and war.

Challenging God,
Help us to be the change we want to see in the world.
May we not jealously guard what we have, but budge up and make space at the table.

- Space for the oppressed and persecuted,
- Space for this discriminated against,
- Space for all who have been excluded,
- Space for all who may not have felt welcome.

Challenging God,
Help us to be the change we want to see in the world.
Change our judgmental natures, that our split-second judgements and internalized prejudices might not govern our behaviours.

- Change the hearts of those who govern or have power,
- Change the attitudes of people towards each other,
- Change the priorities of the world,
- Change us, that we might influence others.

Challenging God,
Help us to be the change we want to see in the world.
Speak words of healing to those who most need to hear them, we pray particularly for those known to us, for:

- Healing for all coping with grief,
- Healing for issues of physical and mental wellbeing,
- Healing for relationships and difficult situations,
- Healing for hearts and minds and souls.

Challenging God,
Help us to be the change we want to see in the world.
May we never grow complacent in our mission, to make your priorities the world's priorities, and as we seek to bring that change, may we start with ourselves.

Amen.⁴

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST, IN EVERY AGE

Beset by change but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.

Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ's humanity.

For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood,
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.

We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And to spread his liberating Word.

Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000)

BLESSING

Go out to make space at the table,
for those who are fighting to find room at it,
for those who gather crumbs underneath it,
for those still trying to get into the room the table is in,
for those who don't even know the table exists...
Go out to make space at the table,
And may all be invited.

Amen.⁵

⁴ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

⁵ Additional prayers by Tim Baker