

**PENTECOST 15B 05-09-2021** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Ps 125; James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

*Mark 7.24-37*

*From there Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'*

What is it like to experience discrimination? Some of us may have no idea; some may know all too well; and others of us may have just caught glimpses.

I broke my knee some years ago and got around in a wheelchair for a few weeks. It was difficult, and I found that people treated me differently- and this was a temporary disability. If you have an obvious disability- and there are many disabling conditions that are not obvious- you may be seen as different.

Being a bit different is fine, as long as your difference doesn't result in discrimination by others or by those with the power in society. We would like to think of Australia in 2021 as an egalitarian society, where class, colour, gender identity, level of ability and country of origin are irrelevant, and everyone can get a fair go.

The right of human beings to equality of opportunity, status, pay, suffrage, and treatment by the law is recognised by most Australians, although we still have some way to go if we are to make this aspiration into fact.

In this country the most glaringly obvious evidence of inequality is in statistics such as the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared with that of other Australians: or the massive over-representation of First Nations people in the prison system.

In the days when Mark's Gospel and the letter of James were written, equality was thought of very differently, if it was considered at all. Slavery was an accepted and necessary part of the economy; women and children had few rights; and the only way to have any power over your own life was to make sure you were born male into a well-off family. Inequality was built into the patriarchal system and assumed to be the normal, God-given way society should operate.

Jesus was a man of his time, but he had an extraordinary ability to see beyond the accepted norms. Even so, his response to the Syrophenician woman sounds horribly discriminatory.

Who or what is a SYRO-PHOENICIAN? It just means that she was from Phoenicia, a nation that had been incorporated into the Roman province of Syria, to the north of Galilee.

When the Syrophenician woman approached Jesus, he would have been shocked; in asking him for help she broke all sorts of social conventions, and she knew it. She was desperate for help for her daughter, whom she believed Jesus could heal- if he could be persuaded to listen to someone like her.

This foreign, non-Jewish woman begged Jesus to heal her tormented daughter, and he spoke of giving the children's food to the dogs. Jewish people considered dogs to be unclean animals, and to refer to someone as a dog was seriously insulting.

The woman answered Jesus back, which must have taken some nerve. Jesus was sufficiently moved by her answer to give her what she requested, and her daughter was healed.

The Gospel of Mark tells this story as an illustration of the ministry of Jesus extending outwards from the people of Israel towards non-Jewish people. The next healing story tells of another Gentile, the man who was deaf and could not speak.

We don't know when Jesus decided to include non-Jewish people in his movement; we don't know if he realised slowly or suddenly that he needed to share God's love with everybody, not only his own people. We can guess that it can't have been easy for someone brought up to steer clear of anyone who wasn't like him. It meant he had to break rules of social propriety, shocking those who saw themselves as the keepers of righteousness.

In the letter of James we read of his dismay that people in the church seemed to have forgotten so quickly how Jesus lived.

They were discriminating against poor people and showing favouritism to the well-off. Not only that, they were doing nothing to help the poor. It seems that those Christians thought their interior faith was enough and didn't see that faith must lead to action.

More than two thousand years later, what can these ancient texts teach us? After all, our context is so different. But as we know, discrimination is alive and well, even if sometimes expressed more subtly. We have all seen news of the frightened and desperate families trying to leave Afghanistan to escape the Taliban. Our government and those of other countries have rescued many, but there are still many left behind to face the terror.

These are people just like us, who want their children to grow up in safety, able to go to school, to live and work without fear. Treating them or any refugees as different, alien, or 'other', is not the way of Jesus. Our country has kept people who came by boat to seek refuge in detention for years; there are currently refugees from Afghanistan who cannot be sent back and yet are still kept in detention, and others living precarious lives on temporary visas. The Biluela family are still living in fear of deportation.

Jesus rejected the conventions that welcomed some inside and kept the rest outside. James reminded people that faith in Jesus means following his example. That means we cannot discriminate against people who we think are not like us.

God loves everyone, including all of us. God loves us if we are young, old, wealthy, hard-up, straight, gay or neither; whatever the colour of our skin, wherever we happen to have been born; whether we are over-worked or unemployed, have a PhD or didn't finish school, whether we have perfectly functioning bodies or bits of us are missing or don't work.

We are to be the welcoming smiles and arms of Jesus, the open hands and generous hearts that respond in love because we have experienced his love.

Let us pray that we will learn to love those who are the last, the least and the lost, and open our hearts to those the world rejects.

The Lord be with you.