

Like a dog with a bone!

Isaiah 56^{1,6-8} [Psalm 67; Romans 11^{1-2,29-32}] Matthew 15²¹⁻²⁸

*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from their masters' table.
[Matthew 15²⁷]*

What do you think Jesus' laugh sounded like? John reports the fact that 'Jesus wept' when he records Jesus' response to the death of Lazarus, but nowhere is it recorded that Jesus laughed! Is that because he didn't laugh? Certainly not! It is probably because he laughed so much that it was part of who he was and the Gospel writers, who had first-hand experience of him, didn't feel that there was a need to record that ordinary part of Jesus' character.

One of the concerns to the disciples and to the early Church, as it had been throughout the history of the Hebrew people, was how exclusive their faith was. The Hebrews believed that the Covenant was for them and for them exclusively – that God had chosen the Jews to the exclusion of everyone else. However, as the reading from Isaiah indicates, that wasn't something that would last for ever.

- ✘ A time would come when there would be **foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants.**
- ✘ The two conditions were that **they would keep the Sabbath and do not profane it and hold fast my Covenant.**
- ✘ The benefits would be that **these I will bring to my Holy Mountain, they will be made joyful in my house of prayer, and that their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar.**
- ✘ The same God **who gathers the outcasts of Israel will gather others to them besides those already gathered in.**

That concern of who faith and its benefits were for was certainly around at the time of Jesus and he was clear that his mission was as the Jewish Messiah and he states clearly, **I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.**

We know that this limitation was only for Jesus' life-span on earth – ultimately, the early Church would work out that the mission of the Church transcended limitations and boundaries: this is good news for us, because it means that the Gospel message includes us!

Yet, the Gospel for today gives one example of where the limits were tested and the boundaries extended. This is when we know that Jesus could laugh!

- ✘ The first thing to notice for the Gospel is that Jesus is on holiday. He had been having a tough time with the Jewish authorities and had gone abroad, into Gentile territory at least, to get away from it all.
- ✘ The woman, a nameless local, had got some idea of who Jesus was and so shouted and continued to shout, demanding that the **Son of David** heal her daughter.
- ✘ Jesus is down-right rude and the text records, **but he did not answer her at all.** The disciples were out of their depth and wanted something done: **send her away, for she keeps shouting after us** (no-one likes their holidays being disrupted).
- ✘ Jesus seems comfortable with this because he knew and accepted the limitations of his mission. Yet somehow, this woman gets close to Jesus **and knelt before him.** She appeals to Jesus directly, **Lord, help me!** How awkward for those present, but how would we respond?

- ✘ Jesus is downright rude (again!) – **it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs** (dogs being the usual and derogatory way that Jews referred to Gentiles). *It’s not fair* – how often that phrase is used: the woman could have argued that *it’s not fair* my daughter is tormented by a demon; we can take our concerns to God and begin, *it’s not fair!*

- ✘ What the more piously inclined often miss is that ‘written words cannot convey a twinkle in the eye’ (RT France)! That same twinkle seems to be present in the eye of the woman as she comes back at Jesus – **even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table!** Here is where we would hear Jesus’ great roar of laughter and the woman laughing with him! **Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.**

Given 2000 years of Christian history we now can be certain that we belong in God’s plan of salvation and that we belong enough to laugh together, and push at the boundaries together. How important it is for us to claim our heritage in this country where everyone belongs in their Parish Church – the cure of souls in the Parish that is the Bishops’ and mine - and how we long for the doors to be open again so that we can celebrate this.

Forgive me as I am like a dog with a bone on this theme, but standing proud above all the schemes for mission and inclusion that the Church has innovated and invested £millions in is the Parish Church, where the worship of God’s people, the rhythm of prayer (and the laughter) celebrate a God who is blind to colour or wealth or influence, and where God’s costly grace made known in Christ shapes what we are, what we say and what we do.