**2nd September 2018**

**Mark 7:24–37**

So we are trying to extend WIFI into the church – to particularly help the guys on the control desk at the back and the performance of the laptop. But someone commented that if my sermon gets boring people will start playing on their phones. I shall have to redouble my efforts to make them interesting!

Generations of preachers at Princeton Seminary in the United States were schooled in their preaching skills by Dr. Donald Macleod. Among the points Dr. Macleod would make was the importance of choosing a compelling sermon
title.

He used to tell of Mrs. O'Leary who would hop on the Fifth Avenue bus on Sunday morning in Manhattan and pass the great churches along that thoroughfare. As the bus would approach each church, she would eye the sign in front with the sermon title and decided, on the basis of what she read,
whether to get off the bus and attend that church. Dr. Macleod's constant refrain was, "Pick a title that will make Mrs. O'Leary get off the bus."

The theme for today, could have titled the sermon as ‘dogs, demons and determination’

From my background, of northern working class communities, to call someone a ‘dog’ is to insult them. President Trump has regularly called people who opposed him ‘dogs’. In the first century of Jesus’ day it was also insulting to call someone a dog. The Jews, believing they were the special chosen people of God often thought of Gentiles (non Jews) as ‘dogs’. The Gentiles would usually say equally uncomplimentary things back! However, it is shocking to read in our gospel passage today that Jesus called the Gentiles ‘dogs’

A while back the national URC magazine Reform contained a Bible Study written by Lawrence Moore. The article was on this passage of scripture and had the caption:

‘*what comes out of Jesus’ mouth is rude, boorish, sexist, racist and prejudiced’*.

(Maybe Mrs O’Leary would have got off the bus to listen to that sermon!)

He said that the encounter between Jesus and the Phoenician woman has a fascinating history of critical treatment in the commentaries. Preacher after preacher would have us believe that Jesus is here engaged in some sort of skilful teaching exercise: he quite deliberately brushes the Phoenician woman off so that she persists in her quest for healing for her daughter. If we’re to believe them, this is all an elaborate object lesson for the disciples, who are onlookers - a lesson about how a Gentile woman exhibits the sort of faith that Jesus is looking for in Israel.

‘Does that ring true to you?’ Lawrence Moore challenged his readers? Or does it sound like special pleading? After all, give this passage to anyone who hasn’t got a vested interest in rescuing Jesus from racial and religious prejudice and you’ll get the obvious response: Jesus starts off by exhibiting a thoroughly first century Jewish prejudice against the Gentiles, referring to them as ‘dogs’ and is basically converted through this conversation with this foreign woman. But that’s the reading we particularly want to avoid, isn’t it? It disturbs us to think of Jesus needing conversion or having lessons to learn.

Lawrence goes on to point out that this story comes immediately after the story of how Jesus teaches about defilement. There Jesus talks about what is in people’s hearts – their deepest motives, priorities and affections. What really defiles you are not the externals but what comes out of the mouth. Jesus argument is that what people say exposes the pollution that is inside them.

From this Mark immediately moves us on to a conversation. Do we need any further invitation to pay close attention to what comes out of the mouths of the conversation partners? And here is the shock: it is Jesus who mouths the strong stuff. ‘Let the children be satisfied first; it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it the dogs.’

It is what comes out of the Gentile’s woman’s mouth that converts Jesus!

For Lawrence Moore, Jesus is forced to confront his own inherited prejudices. His Jewish centric world is shaken to its core. He is shown a new world of God’s grace – the grace that embraces the whole world. And so in the next episode he heals another Gentile person by curing him of his deafness and speech impediment and then takes compassion on a Gentile crowd who are hungry and feeds them. Mark shows that Jesus has learnt his lesson.

Lawrence Moore concludes that Mark has not placed the truth on the lips of Jesus but on the lips of this woman. Jesus has understood something new and converting about God because of this conversation. He ends his article by asking: ‘How open are we to hearing the truth about God coming to us from the most unexpected places?’

Well, you can imagine that Lawrence’s bible study provoked a number of letters. One respondent said it was blasphemy to insult the Lord Jesus Christ in this way and to suggest he has sinned in this matter. Another said that the notion of a developing and growing Jesus fills her with hope that a part of God is prepared to learn with us and that we all need to be rooted in listening and love. Another thought that Jesus acts out an extraordinary range of qualities to shock and move people on in their understanding of God and that God was always highly sensitive to the needs of the poor, the excluded and the stranger in our midst and that we need to understand Jesus’ comment with this background in mind.

One person quoted Cardinal Newman who said *‘below on earth, to grow is to change, to be perfect is to have changed much’* and Bishop John Robinson who said *‘those who most want to change the world are most changed by the world’.*

It surprises me how many Christians seem to be afraid of asking radical questions of the Bible, or indeed, are disinterested in real Bible Study. Why is this? If we are not growing and changing then surely by any definition we are dead.

Well it’s a controversial passage and would have made a good one to study in our church fellowship groups.

I think Lawrence is being provocative but I don’t go along with him. Jesus certainly saw his mission as primarily to the Jews first of all. His work on the cross and the resurrection would open up the new covenant sealed in his blood that would make clear the love and grace and mercy for all people, Jews and Gentiles. All are welcome, all are included.

We do not know the tone of voice that Jesus would have spoken this verse ‘it’s not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs’. As we know in everyday conversation – your tone of voice may convey seriousness or sarcasm. Jesus may well have been quoting a popular prejudice of Jews against Gentiles but quoting a prejudice does not mean you agree with it.

I do believe Lawrence is spot on to challenge us to be open to hear God’s truth in surprising places and to be open to those who through prejudice, we may classify as ‘dogs’

Who are the ‘dogs of today? Who don’t we get on with. Who do we find difficult? Who in society are despised; who we have a prejudice against, who we don’t associate with?

As we open our church are we open to think new thoughts about what it means to be church- to cross social boundaries to think again about our response to those we consider beyond the pale?

We all carry our demons with us; literally and metaphorically. A healthy church will have a healthy diversity of people in its midst. Most of us know our faults and failings, our need for grace and mercy, our longing for healing and to be made whole; for the Lord to touch us and say ‘be opened’, ‘be well’.

Its level ground at the foot of the cross. All are equal in need of being listened to and loved. Jesus listened to this woman and her needs. His compassion went out to her.

A story is told of a Father and his young daughter who had had a very strained relationship for some time. Returning from a trip, the Father did something that was very unusual for him. As he entered into the room he presented his daughter with a necklace that he had bought her. Completely
overcome with joy by this unexpected act of giving, the young girl inadvertently dropped the necklace and went running from the room with tears in her eyes. She returned shortly only to find as she walked into the room that her new necklace was now around the neck of her infant baby sister.
"Oh," said the father. "I went on and gave it to her. You didn't like it anyway." He wasn't listening. He wasn't listening.

Compare that story with the story of a family that went into a restaurant. The waitress walked up and, looking at the young boy, said: What will it be? The boy eagerly shouted back: "I'll take a hamburger, French fries, and a chocolate shake."
The mother immediately interrupted: Oh, that's not what he wants. "He'll take the roast beef, a baked potato, and a glass of milk." Much to the surprise of both the mother and the boy, the waitress completely ignored her and again asked the boy: "And what do you want on that hamburger?" The boy
shouted back, "ketchup, lots of ketchup." "And what kind of shake?"  "Make it chocolate." The boy then turned to his parents with a big smile on his face and said: "Say, ain't she something. She thinks that I'm real!"

If we start really hearing people they are suddenly going to become real to us. Jesus calls us into that healing ministry of listening and loving and sorting out the demons in our lives.

That will require determination. For a woman to shout in public is still considered an “unwomanly” act in many parts of the world and was so in Jesus’ day. A woman who speaks loudly or shouts was stereotyped as ill-behaved, hysterical, or excessively aggressive. All of these adjectives were and still are used to put women down.

However, there are times when the raised voices of women are powerful. The woman in this story had a choice to shout or to be silent and lose the possibility of healing for her daughter. She claims her right to be heard, and she is heard.

To continue to live with a child who has no hope for a cure is an unimaginably painful experience. The pain of mothers whose children have been killed in ethnic and racial war, permanently wounded through the effects of militarism, or drugs, or alcohol abuse, is reflected in the pain of this mother. She seems to have no husband, or family, as none is mentioned in the text. She seems to be alone with only her sick girl through whom she sees an extension of herself and her right to a future.

Because of her tenacity, her commitment to her daughter’s healing, and her ability to use the “power of the weak” in a positive and life-giving manner, she also becomes the catalyst for moving Jesus to acknowledge his ministry to the gentile people.

William Lloyd Garrison was a great abolitionist in the United States. Garrison was an angry man, angry with indignation caused by the unbelievably inhumane treatment many of the slaves experienced. He hated slavery with everything that was in him.

One day one of his best friends, Samuel May, tried to calm him down. He said to Garrison, "my friend, try to moderate your indignation and keep more cool. Why, you are all on fire."

Garrison replied, "Brother May, I have need to be all on fire, for I have mountains of ice around me to melt."

Well, the only way any of us can melt mountains of ice is to be on fire.

The only way Christ can use any of us is when we are driven by a great passion, with determination, when we feel or hear his voice within our heart showing us a great cause that needs to be championed. Nothing is usually accomplished in this world by people who have no passion. That's one reason we need God to be in our hearts giving us his passion for the world.

Many of you may be feeling exhausted and you deserve a rest. Yet when the time is right, I pray God will stir us again with new passion for new causes and with a new determination to work for his kingdom. This isn’t the end but the start of a new beginning.

**Call to worship**

Welcome back

Some things have changed

Some things remain the same.

The love and mercy of God remains constant from generation to generation

The compassion of Christ still reaches out to the worst sinner

The promise of the Spirit is still there to empower us in worship and witness and guide us into all truth.

May the blessing of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit be with us today as we come back to worship

**Opening prayer**

Valued without distinction

and called without favour;

**we gather in the love of God.**

Invited to places of deep change

and entrusted with lives of grace;

**we gather in the compassion of Christ.**

Encouraged to be authentic

and inspired to make a difference;

**we gather in the power of the Spirit.**

God of surprise and awe,

you who can turn our many

hatreds and fears around;

**come to us in this time of worship.**

**Challenge our sure perspectives**

**and unsettle our fixed opinions.**

Above all, instill in us

a vision for a new world

and a re-creative way

of living wholeheartedly within it.

**Prayer of confession**

So often, O God, we know the theory,

so often we mouth (and sing) words

of inclusion, compassion, and “justice for all.”

Yet the reality remains –

our confession rings true –

**it is a truly difficult thing**

**to love our neighbours**

**as they really are;**

**to feel as they may feel,**

**and to be as they may be** *(pause)***.**

We pray, then, for hearts

open to gradual, yet genuine change.

**May the encounters we seek**

**and the trust we help create,**

**bring us to more hopeful understandings**

**about ourselves and**

**the world of your making** *(pause)***.**

May there be peace in our restlessness;

**may there be peace in our time, O God.**

**Words of assurance**

Friends, hear the good news:

The Spirit of God is at work

to bring about the peace

and healing we so desire.

Open and attentive to the Spirit’s life-giving ways,

we are a forgiven and free people.

**Thanks be to God! Amen.**

**We gather as followers of Jesus**

**This is the Lord’s church not ours and we pray that Christ may be at the centre of all that we do and say.**

**So we prayerfully sing Jesus we enthrone you.**

**Jesus we enthrone you**

**The Lord’s Prayer.**

Welcome back.

I wonder if we may greet oneanother:

There is a universal greeting from the Indian subcontinent that recgonises that we are all children of God:

 “The God within me, greets the God within you.”

Bow to each other and say that.

**Welcome back – did you have a good summer?**

**Anyone like to share what they have been up to?**

Opening the word with children

**The divine inside**

After gathering the children together, ask them to

Comment or reflect on the greeting shared earlier in

The service. What was it like to offer this greeting to

someone? What was it like to have the words said

to you? Explain that when we see God in another

person, we are saying that we are all created equal

and are one in God’s sight. We may be different in appearance, age, beliefs or nationality, we are all human

beings with feelings and hopes for the future. Precious in God’s sight

**Prayer of dedication**

Source of all goodness and compassion,

move us this day

to be generous in our giving and care.

May we not hold back in fear or self-protection

but give so that others might find

renewed meaning and hope

in this life, in this time.

In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray for those on the edge of the church,
those who would like to be more involved but feel excluded
and those who find the church a painful place but cannot leave.
**God, let us into your love
so that we may
with one voice
and one heart
love our neighbour. Amen**

Let us pray for those whom society considers beyond the pale,
those whose crimes are so horrific that forgiveness is foreign
and those who are so desperate that they come anyway.
**God, let us into your love
so that we may
with one voice
and one heart
love our neighbour. Amen**

Let us pray for those separated from us by boundaries of belief,
those who cannot accept that there is a God
and those whose faith we find untenable.
**God, let us into your love
so that we may
with one voice
and one heart
love our neighbour. Amen**

Let us pray for those who belong to a different class of people,
those who are of a different gender, age, race, education, wealth
and for ourselves who are less 'normal' than we think we are.
**God, let us into your love
so that we may
with one voice
and one heart
love our neighbour. Amen**

God, our strength,
as we come to you in prayer,
we calm ourselves and we are quiet,
for we know that:
**as the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people.**

We pray for your Church,
that your word of truth and hope may go out from our doors.
That your wisdom may be heard in our worship
and your love through our lives:
for we know that:
**as the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people.**

We pray for your world,
that your truth may be heard in government,
your wisdom in negotiations
and your freedom experienced by those in chains:
for we know that:
**as the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people.**

We think of our city/town/village,
our neighbours, families and friends,
asking that they may rest in your peace
and that those who need you now may be touched in their hearts
by the knowledge of your grace:
for we know that:
**as the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people.**

We think of those who need to know you in their lives
who are sick, in mind or body or spirit:
the homeless, the confused, the needy, the refugee.
May we be your hands, your voice, your heart in this world:
for we know that:
**as the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people.**

And we remember all those who will die
or be born this day.
May our comings and goings be in peace,
and our future in your hands:
for we know that:
**as the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people.**

So we give you our lives, our hopes, our very being,
for we know that:
**as the mountains surround Jerusalem,
so the Lord surrounds his people.
Amen.**

**SENDING OUT**

Friends, go into this new week

being quick to listen, slow to speak,

and fully prepared to be changed

in both heart and mind.

**We will follow in the ways of Christ.**

**We will seek a more understanding**

**and compassionate world.**

And so now may the love of God,

the grace and generosity of Jesus,

and the abiding friendship of the Spirit

be with us now and evermore.

**Amen!**