**16th August 2020**



[Call to worship](javascript:void(0))

Come, with purpose,  
into the presence of the living God.  
Come to worship, and to be amazed,  
to discover and learn new things.  
Come, knowing that God welcomes us all with open arms.  
Amen.

**HYMN: The Lord’s my shepherd**



[A prayer of approach](javascript:void(0))

Lord God, as we come before you now,  
we open our hearts to you.  
Help us to see that we can learn so much from others,  
even from those with whom we think  
we may not share much in common.  
Make us willing to stand out from the crowd,  
to hear your voice, and act upon it. Amen.



[A prayer of confession](javascript:void(0))

Lord, sometimes we look as though we are listening to others.  
We may even make all the right noises!  
But we confess that our attention is often anywhere but  
where it is supposed to be.  
Forgive us, Lord, for missed opportunities.

Sometimes we are too distracted by our own concerns.  
We care only for ourselves,  
and listen only to those who say what we want to hear.  
Forgive us, Lord, for missed opportunities.

Sometimes we don’t listen to people  
because we don’t like them,  
or because they are different from us.  
Sometimes we have bad or unhelpful thoughts.  
Forgive us, Lord, for missed opportunities.

Sometimes we don’t listen to you, Lord,  
because we are too busy,  
or a bit frightened about what you might say to us.  
Forgive us, Lord, for missed opportunities. Amen.



[A prayer of praise and thanksgiving](javascript:void(0))

Living Lord,  
we praise you that you are a God who loves.  
You have given us a marvellous world,  
to live in and to share with all your people.  
You, O God, love everyone equally,  
and we thank you that we are each unique.  
We thank you that each one of us  
has so much to give – and to receive – from each other.  
Thank you for each new experience that you give us. Amen.



**Goodbye to Steph Atkins as she leaves to start training for ministry**

**Ordination and induction of Elders**

**HYMN: In Christ Alone**

**Matthew 15.10-28**

From my background, of northern working class communities, to call someone a ‘dog’ is to insult them. If any of our elders or would be ministers, like Steph used such language in public they would be challenged – and rightly so. Facebook and social media seems to allow people to be rude and offensive.

President Trump has regularly called people who opposed him ‘dogs’ and seems to get away with being rude and offensive- baffling that the good people of America have put up with him for so long.

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’

This is a controversial passage. Is what comes out of Jesus mouth rude and offensive?

Does Jesus start 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?

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. You may have got all A grades at you’re A levels but what is your character as a person? Do you have integrity, compassion, mercy? That is what really counts in the eyes of the Lord. Jesus argument is that what people say exposes the pollution that is inside them.

If you are grumpy, miserable, condemning of others, critical, angry resentful – something’s not right inside my friend? You need heart surgery by the Holy Spirit! Talk to god about those attitudes. Ask for forgiveness, forgive, be renewed by the Spirit. Draw the poison! Create in me a clean heart O God, as David prayed in Psalm 51.

From this story Matthew 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 seems to convert Jesus, confronting his own inherited prejudices. He is shown a new world of God’s grace – the grace that embraces the whole world.

Well that’s one possible interpretation. Shocking though it is.

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 God’s 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.

We do need 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’.

The A level results have raised controversy because those coming from deprived areas had their grades marked down more than those from wealthy areas.

The estimated results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have been linked to how well schools have performed in the past.

And the screeching u-turn in Scotland was because this was found to exaggerate inequalities - and threatened to drag down clever pupils in low-achieving schools, trapping them in the disadvantage of their postcode.

The exam boards say that there is no bias in the A-level results, whether on grounds of deprivation, gender or ethnicity.

But tug a little harder and gaps appear. Independent schools increased their A\*s and A grades by five percentage points - it was only two percentage points in comprehensives and 0.3 percentage points in further education colleges.

Who gets the crumbs from the table?

Those migrants crossing the English Channel are often classified as less than human. They may be fleeing wars and persecution. They may just be wanting a better life, reaching out for the crumbs from our tables. Let’s pity them rather than demonise them.

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.

[Prayers of intercession](javascript:void(0))

Lord,

The Canaanite woman sought your help. She loved her daughter so much, she was so desperately in need, that she wouldn’t give up till she had her answer.  
We pray in faith.  
Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

Lord, may we learn from this woman, to wait on you expectantly, patiently, persistently, doggedly. Grant us the courage of our convictions when we truly believe we are doing your will.  
We pray in faith.  
Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

We pray today for those who feel excluded, whatever their situation, whatever the reason: for prisoners, refugees, the homeless; for the sick, the mentally unstable; for any who feel that they are outsiders.  
We pray in faith.  
Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

We pray for those who have been given their A level results. Some are elated and some are disappointed. None have been able to prove themselves. We pray your hand in all the plans of those who look to you for their futures. Guide them on the path they should go.

We pray in faith.  
Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

We pray for our world and cry out for peace. We pray for the people of Lebanon and Belarus in revolt at corrupt leaders, looking for renewal. We pray for Israel and the Arab world that mutual understanding and peace may develop but also with justice for the Palestinians. Let no one be treated like dogs.

We pray in faith.  
Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

We pray for ourselves when our faith is weak, or we feel that we don’t belong.  
We pray in faith.  
Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.  
Amen.



[A way into prayer](javascript:void(0))

Ask people to sit quietly and reflect on what they really want God to do in their lives. Invite them to imagine themselves as the Canaanite woman. Say: Do not give up praying till you feel a peace, that Jesus has heard you. Tell him that whatever the answer you will accept it humbly and gratefully. Say to him: ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant hears you.’



**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Hymn: O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder**

**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!**