

14th after Trinity - Mark 7. 24-37

Being Inclusive

Jesus Honours a Syrophenician Woman's Faith

Jesus Heals a Deaf and Mute Man

I want to talk about one of values as a church - Inclusivity

Jesus gives us not one but 2 great examples today of reaching out to those who are not like us.

Being inclusive is not merely saying - our doors are open, come in

Its not simply saying - you'd always be welcome here

That is simply - being available, being there.

(Which is an important first step)

Being inclusive means taking down the barriers that stop people begin able to join in

It means looking round and seeing who's not here, and thinking about why not, and what would help them

Being inclusive is active.

Here's a story about a deaf and dumb fellow , and Jesus shows his care and love and understanding.

And what you need to note here is how it seems from the man's perspective.

He was brought to Jesus by some people - he might not have understood where he was going or why. He had not "heard" of Jesus, and he could not even ask the questions - who is this Rabbi? Deafness made someone the equivalent of a minor, a child, in Jewish law, and some mute's were seen as mentally ill - all of which excused them from keeping the law - for their own good - you understand. Yet Jesus is not afraid or reluctant to do as this man's friends asked.

And the first thing Jesus does, is take him away from the crowd, the distractions. When Neil was my curate, and completely deaf, he told me not to wear patterned jumpers or tops - because you can't see the hand movements as clearly. Jesus takes him away to a quiet place.

And then again, he shows the man what he is doing - putting fingers in his ears, spitting on his tongue - it might seem strange or gross, but he was communicating - this is what's going on. - I'm opening your ears, I'm releasing your tongue. This is the most intimate we ever read of Jesus being. Gentle and wonderfully close.

And the man is healed, miraculously, completely - made whole - and a full part of the community and society again. And because he's in a quiet back alley, when the man begins to hear, its not the roar of a crowd, but just Jesus lovely voice that he hears.

So what are the barriers for people of mixed ability here? Is it steps that are hard to get up or that are hard to see? Is it service sheets too small, or expecting people to find page numbers? I wish there was signing for those who are deaf, but are there other ways we can not simply - be here - but actively welcome people? I'm sure you did an inclusivity audit a decade ago, I think everyone had to, but maybe we need to do that again.

We have to change and adapt what we do, to make sure that everyone can be included.

Ok - for the other story...

She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

“First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

And its a challenge reading to choose - one in which Jesus calls a woman “a dog”. Even if you’re not Politically correct, woke, or whatever - it seems a shocking thing for him to say.

And there are 2 theories about this -

Either - it was so shocking and unkind, that he must have said. No one writing a history of Jesus would have made it up. I mean elsewhere the Bible certainly doesn’t cover up people’s mistakes and imperfections - but Jesus - you might expect to present him as perfect. He must have said it, you wouldn’t make it up.

Or - the other theory goes that although its shocking to our ears, it was so normal then that no-one really thought anything of it. Certainly neither the disciples or the woman reacted, and maybe the first readers of Mark just thought it was ok. Because words change meaning, and the way we label groups who are not like us is one of those cultural markers that we don’t notice, until the culture changes.

Either way, as you can imagine, all the commentaries and preachers in the world want to help Jesus out of this awkward spot and come to his defence and rescue...

So maybe he was challenging her. Well, definitely he was! But he often did that to people - go and sell all you have, he said to the rich young man. Leave the dead to bury the dead - he said to a grieving son. Or - do you want to get well? He asked a man who’d been sick for over 30 years. Jesus would often make people really question themselves, face themselves, and that is no bad thing.

The second thing to say, is that he actually did help her in the end. He may have given her a hard time, but when he saw she was genuine, he did heal her daughter. And maybe that’s what the woman and her family would have remembered, rather than the insult.

As a way to talk about inclusivity - this story highlights some really interesting things.

There’s the issue of racism - calling people names - the groups we mistrust -

Jesus shows the disciples, and us, that it doesn’t matter if people are of a different faith, or culture, they can have what God offers. True, the woman had to fight to get it. True, she calls him Lord - so there is some acknowledgment of who he is, and true, she has to accept that she is not a child of Israel.

For the Jews is was Gentiles, in Alderholt it seems to be travellers. When “they” are about, people block the car parks. I’m sure there’s really good reasons, but as an outsider it sounds awful!

There’s the issue of what we think our God is like - does he discriminate? The Jews, despite what it says in their own scripture, clearly thought the Messiah was just for them, and that God really only cared about them - his special people. Is that what we think - that God loves us in church more than those outside? We sometimes act that way. Certainly people out there think that we think we’re superior. God so loved the World, not the people in church, that he sent his Son. Would we welcome some Afghans? Maybe more than travellers! Or would we say, they’re Muslims they wouldn’t be interested in coming to church?

(In Birmingham we were delivering leaflets offering a healing service or just if people wanted us to pray fro them through doors. This was a black church, in a very mixed race area - with lots of

Pakistani and Bangladeshi families, and people from the church said - don't put it through their doors, they're not interested in us).

And There's the difference of words and actions -

Jesus may have said the word dog - but he delivered - literally and figuratively!

One of our other values is that we practice what we preach - the world and the church has enough hypocrites - so if we say we want to be inclusive, then we may need to look around and see who's missing, and work at it. And it might be costly.

One of the signs of a healthy congregation - is the willingness to bear the cost of discipleship.

Being a disciple, following Jesus, is not comfortable. Sometimes being inclusive is not comfortable.

Looking round, we don't have many youngsters, or young people - remember them - under 30?!

We have appointed Zoe as our children and families worker - for the under 11's - which is great. But we want the families to be part of us.

So where's are they - at Messy Church or Recreate. So may need to do more if we want them to join us. We may need to leave our comfort zones. And church may not be the same if there are lots of young people, or young children - in fact I know it won't be the same, because it will be more inclusive - more like the kingdom of God.

And I know that we do all want to be inclusive, and we try, I know. But lets not kid ourselves.

Sometimes we will try to welcome and be inclusive and we'll get our hands bitten off. They won't want it. And it will hurt, because we'll feel rejected.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we won't be able to accommodate everyone, because Jesus has not returned yet. A mum came to me with a severely autistic child, who was a teenager - and I was like oh yes, let him come, it will be fine. But this guy couldn't speak - he was terribly disruptive, even violent. We just couldn't do it - couldn't put things in place, couldn't change enough.

So we yes we will fail, but that's not an excuse not keep trying, to keep working at this value.

Because this isn't really about them - its about us....

We are broken, fallen, messed people - who can't get it right, Who call people names, or try to drag people to church...

Yet God welcomes us! We are included.

And that's the moment we need to live in.

Despite who we are, despite our disabilities, hidden prejudices, God still says - come to me - there's room.

And once we remember that, then we can hold the door open, for the person behind us - they let me in. - there'll be room for you too.