

Sermon – The English Church Heidelberg, Sunday 16th August

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:10-28

Offensive Grace?

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Let me begin with a story. At the moment, we have a Summer Festival in Eppingen, where my wife and I live. In fact, since I've moved to Germany, the town seems to have had some kind of mini-festival or celebration every two months or so. But this is a really big one—there's a big stage in the park, and there are concerts there basically every night from Tuesday to Saturday. Anyway, the park is only a 2-minute walk from our house, so we went there on Thursday to listen to a big band (loads of trumpets and horns and the like). And they started playing YMCA – do you know that song? Of course you do! And you know of course there are actions to this song, right? Well, there I was enjoying the song, before I started realising that all the people around me doing the actions—were doing them wrong! I couldn't believe it. The whole point is that you do the C *this* way, so that people watching you, like yourselves, can see that it's a C. So I turned to my wife and said 'Rahel, they're all doing it wrong!'—and she was there doing the wrong actions!

The experience I had was, in a very small and really trivial way, was the experience of feeling *offended*. And whether it's as trivial as this, or much more serious, being/feeling offended is an almost unavoidable part of living in a social world with different human beings. Even when we do our best to respect others and not to offend, we bump into each other, rub up against each other, cross lines that we perhaps did or didn't know were there—and we find ourselves to a greater or lesser degree, offending or being offended by one another.

The human experience of 'being offended' – of being affronted and bothered, even socially injured or hurt – is a major theme in our Gospel reading from today. The shocking, and perhaps offensive truth, however, is that it is *Jesus* who is the One who causes offense. We can often imagine Jesus to be a meek and mild kind of man who wouldn't hurt a fly—but actually our caricaturing of Jesus in this way falls *way* short of the figure we encounter in the pages of the Gospels. John the Baptist caught a glimpse of Jesus' radical, explosive dynamism when he proclaimed him as One who would come after him baptising with fire, and 'with winnowing fork in hand to clear the threshing floor, clearing the wheat into the granary but burning the chaff with unquenchable fire'. Yet even for John the Baptist, Jesus defied expectations—so much so that John asked Jesus directly: 'are you the Messiah, or should we expect someone else?'

Jesus could see that, for John, his ministry had been different, perhaps more local and humbler than he expected—and so he responds to him, ‘Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.’

But when Jesus did come to engage with the religious and political leaders of his day, mainly after John the Baptists’ death, the encounter was feisty, and fiery, causing anger and scandal. Only the day after he rode into Jerusalem on a humble donkey, Jesus stormed into the Temple courts, where the Gentiles were supposed to be able to pray, to drive out the people and animals there, turning over the tables of the money changers, furiously declaring the temple to be, as our Isaiah passage states, ‘a house of prayer for all peoples’. The Jesus of the Gospels, then, is both gentle and humble in heart and also consumed with passionate fiery zeal for the Lord’s house; and in his gentle humility and his holy zeal, Jesus’ whole existence was one that defied expectations, caused upheaval, produced astonishment – and provoked *offense*.

Our passage today is a case in point. While we today are, most likely, offended by the story of the encounter with the Canaanite woman—and we will come to that later—for first century Jews hearing our Gospel text, it would have actually been the earlier passage of Jesus’ teaching about ritual purity laws that would have caused the real offense. Jesus declares here: ‘it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles’, by which he means ‘evil intentions/thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.’ It is *these* things, Jesus says, which ‘defile’ a person and keeps them from being able to worship God and stand in his holy presence—eating with unwashed hands, following the dietary and ritual purity laws of the Law, makes no real difference.

Now, we who have grown up in the Christianised, ‘modern’ western cultures, even if we might find the whole idea of religious ‘defilement’ a bit archaic and strange, would generally greet such a pronouncement with nodding approval. Of course, we recognise how high the demand Jesus sets out here—we know our hearts and minds are far from pure! But most of us, I think would be on board with the *idea* that it is the *heart*, and what comes from the within, rather than outward rituals or dietary requirements, that *really* counts, morally and religiously. Well for a first century Jew, and for the first generations of Christians—this teaching was far from clear! What Jesus says was and is an enormous and outrageous claim – Jesus appears to take huge swathes of what the Torah, the Law of Israel, says and renders them irrelevant. No wonder the Pharisees were offended by what Jesus says!

The opposite is the case in the story of Jesus’ encounter with the remarkable Canaanite woman. Whereas the Pharisees were offended by Jesus’ radical teaching on purity, they would not have batted an eyelid at Jesus’s rebuttal of the Canaanite woman. For us however, I’m sure many of us find Jesus’s rude rejection at the Canaanite woman highly offensive—something jarring, concerning, and which sits at odds with so much that we know about Jesus. So what is going on here?

Well, the story begins as Jesus decides to go on a Retreat with his disciples, in the 'district of Tyre and Sidon', a non-Jewish, Gentile area on the coast in the north-west from Galilee. They're taking a step back from ministry—but on the way a local Canaanite woman starts calling out to him 'Lord, Son of David; my daughter is badly tormented by a demon'.

And as readers, who have seen how willingly Jesus has healed those who call on his name, we would expect Jesus to respond with compassion, grant her request and send her on her way. But he doesn't—instead, he ignores her.

As she continues to cry out, Jesus' disciples eventually ask Jesus to 'send her away, for she keeps shouting after us', which presumably implies, that they want him to 'send her away by granting her request and cast the demon from her daughter'. And Jesus breaks his silence, answering the disciples: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Now, this is something Jesus said to his disciples about their mission – but nowhere has Jesus explicitly said this before about *his* own mission—and he hasn't exactly been very strict with keeping to it either up until now, which perhaps gives a little clue as to the twist later on.

Even as the disciples now drop their case, the courageous and desperate Canaanite woman is far from finished. Having been shouting from behind or beside the group, she then comes to Jesus directly, and falls prostrate before him, and simply says to him: 'Lord, help me.' And with this heart-wrenching plea, the disciples, the first century readers and us here today, are all thinking, 'surely Jesus won't turn her away now, will he?' Well, shockingly, Jesus deals out an even harsher rebuttal to the woman, by drawing on a well-known Jewish insult for non-Jewish Gentiles as 'dogs'—'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' And the tension between them couldn't be higher.

But then comes the astonishing comeback. This is often translated, as in our reading, as if her 'Yes, Lord' is an acceptance of what Jesus, so that she says 'Yes, Lord, you're right *but* or *yet*...' There are good reasons however to think that her emphatic 'Yes' is actually a *contradiction* of Jesus' statement rather than an acceptance of it: So when Jesus says, 'It is not fair to throw the children's food to the dogs', her reply means 'Yes, it *is* Lord—it is fair'—and then she gives her reason— '*for* or *because* even the dogs eat the crumbs from under the master's table.' In other words, with an astonishing combination of boldness and humility, she *contests* Jesus' statement – but she contests it not by *denying* that the Gentiles, including herself, are dogs, but by picking up the offensive language and turning it, arguing that such dogs belong to the Master's household and so enjoy the leftovers, the crumbs that fall from the table. She effectively says to Jesus, 'You can call me a dog, but even then, I'm still one of God's dogs. I belong to God's household—you can share the children's bread with me.' And for this, Jesus commends her for her 'great faith', and her daughter is instantly healed.

Now, I wouldn't be surprised if you're still thinking—what was all that about? Even if Jesus had that result in mind all along, as I believe he did, and even if there was maybe more in his actions and countenance that invited her response, did Jesus still really need to refer to her as a *dog*? And even if she contested what Jesus says, even if her faith won through, how could she *accept* that insult? Is she not a human being, beloved of God just as much the children of Israel?

Well, yes. But what the woman's response points to is the deep and shocking mystery of God's grace. 'What is going' is that her response describes the whole drama of the Gospel— 'He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him. To those who did receive him, to those who called on his name, he gave them the right to be called children of God.' (John 1:11-12) We are not accepted or loved by God because of anything on our part or anything inherent in us—it is rather through the grace of God through Jesus the Messiah of Israel. It is not on account of our social status, or our ethnic background, or our moral or religious standing that we receive the bread of life from the Master's Table—it is on account of his mercy. And that is a truth that we can but humbly accept as sinners with impure hearts and minds and yet confidently stand in as members of God's household through Christ Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. For as Paul remarkably concludes his argument: 'God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.'

And with that he praises the God of Israel for this strange and astounding truth (Rom 11: 33+36):

'O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.'