

Isaiah 35.4-7a

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,

'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

*He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.*

He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,

and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,

and the thirsty ground springs of water;

Mark 7.24-37

The Syrophenician Woman's Faith

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Jesus Cures a Deaf Man

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, 'Ephphatha', that is, 'Be opened.' And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.'

'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then shall the lame leap like a deer,
And the tongues of the speechless sing for joy.'

This is what Isaiah says will happen when God comes in the form of the long-promised Messiah – he also says God will come with vengeance and great recompense, which is not altogether a comfortable thought. On whom will he wreak vengeance and whom will he recompense – and for what?

The gospel is little better. It seems that Jesus was trying to travel around incognito - he travelled to Tyre but didn't want anyone to know he was there. Then he went down to Decapolis, and even though he healed the man with a speech impediment, he went away out of sight to do it – and ordered those who knew of the miracle to say nothing about it. Jesus's ordering people about doesn't fit in with our modern ideas of His cosy approachability.

Then the gospel gets even more difficult – when the Syrophenician Gentile woman approached Jesus and asked him to heal her daughter, Jesus refused; when she continued pleading, he even got abusive, and told her he had only come for the Israelites, ‘Let the children be fed first,’ He said, ‘for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ Indirectly calling her and other Gentiles ‘dogs’, was a very grave insult in their culture – and wouldn’t be much better in ours, even though we are a nation of dog lovers!

The woman’s tart response, which was really a rebuke to Jesus, appears to have brought Him to his senses. She said, ‘Even the dogs get the crumbs from the masters’ tables.’ In other words, she pointed out to Jesus that God’s love is not exclusive to the Jews and Jesus should not make it so. Jesus had to admit that she was right and said to her ‘For saying that, you may go, the demon has left your daughter.’

There is a lot to untangle here. Earlier in Mark’s gospel Jesus had called his disciples together and told them ‘you have been given the mystery of God’s kingdom; but to those outside everything comes in riddles’. In today’s reading, the riddle is thrown at a complete outsider, a foreigner and a woman to boot, and yet, whereas the disciples are often seen to misunderstand and get things wrong, she gets it completely right! It’s tempting to think it’s a set up! A woman and a stranger – moving Jesus on in His understanding of His heavenly Father? Whatever next!! But perhaps there is a lesson here for us all – perhaps it had to be done that way.

This passage from Mark seems to me to show the total humanity of Jesus. He needed the inspiration of someone considered outside the bounds of acceptability in Jewish society to remind Him of the true nature of God. It is also a great reminder to us that it isn’t necessarily the most respectable and acceptable of our neighbours who see clearly what God’s true intentions are. After Jesus’s encounter with the foreign woman, he spoke with a deaf man, who could not communicate but still had enough faith to know that Jesus had the power to heal. Neither are obviously what might be called socially

acceptable and yet in both cases they could see more clearly than those Jesus had chosen and who appeared to be special.

So it might be with us in the here and now, those on the outside may see more clearly than we who think we are on the inside and know all the answers. Being a Christian doesn't guarantee that we are necessarily wise, or always right, or even very good – not being a Christian doesn't guarantee that a person has it all wrong. The Good News of the gospel is to be found everywhere. It visits everyone and offers life to all who hear it – the people we consider to be less favoured than us may very well hear and understand it first.

That is why we need to consider whether our pre-conceived ideas may be making us deaf, or blind to the real message of God. Or whether we are handicapped by suspicion of others – even to the extent of xenophobia - towards those who are different. It is so easy to like those who are like us, those who are clean and tidy, well dressed perhaps, those of a similar background and ethnicity. It was interesting to read that a number of exiles from Afghanistan are based in Newport Pagnell – in our Deanery and just along the road. Apparently, they have received a very warm welcome, which is splendid, I hope it lasts if some of the women choose to go into the shops in Newport wearing the burka.

It is tempting to read the prophecies of Isaiah and interpret them only in the context of Jesus healing miracles – because Jesus did, physically, heal the deaf, the blind and the lame, but I think the message is much more profound than that. I think we are all capable of blindness, deafness, handicap – and our goal in life should be to realise an awareness of the potential of God's goodness present in all people – and certainly of the gift of God's of salvation for all. I recently came across the story of a priest who, on his first Sunday in a new parish, sat on the steps of his church dressed as a beggar – he was ignored by all who entered!

To go back to the beginning, I think it is possible that, if God wreaks vengeance at all, (but that is a whole other sermon for another day)

He might just do it on those who find it difficult to live with eyes and ears wide open to recognise His presence in the most unlikely places of the world.

I recently came across this prayer from the Vancouver Assembly Worship Book – and I should like to share it with you, for it also reminds us of the eventual enormous sacrifice of Jesus to ensure that all humankind, of whatever gender or nationality, knows that they are valued and loved by God

Across the barriers that divide race from race: **Reconcile us, O Christ, by your cross**

Across the barriers that divide the rich from the poor: **Reconcile us, O Christ, by your cross**

Across the barriers that divide people of different faiths: **Reconcile us, O Christ, by your cross**

Across the barriers that divide Christians: **Reconcile us, O Christ, by your cross**

Across the barriers that divide men and women, young and old: **Reconcile us, O Christ, by your cross**

Confront us, O Christ, with the hidden prejudices and fears which deny and betray our prayers. Enable us to see the causes of strife. Remove from us all false sense of superiority. Teach us to grow in unity with all God's children. Amen

[Jo Spray]