

## Dogs

6 9 09

Almighty God,  
who called your Church to bear witness  
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:  
help us to proclaim the good news of your love  
that all who hear it may be drawn to you;  
through him who was lifted up on the cross  
and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit  
one God now and for ever.

My text may be found in today's reading from Isaiah:

'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy

(35 v5 & 6)

One of the characteristics of the English is that we are known to be a nation of dog-lovers. I may be able to harden my heart against the beggar sitting on the steps of the post office here in Dinard but it would be another matter entirely were he to have a dog with him. In my prayer room at home in Potters Bar is a print of our church from a nineteenth century photograph which shows the well dressed members of our congregation at that time elegantly descending the steps

of the church from the English garden directly onto Avenue Georges Clemenceau where leaning against the wall is a beggar whose dog is lying faithfully at his feet. Good pitch or what?

However much we may love dogs in all shapes and sizes, it comes as something of a shock to hear Jesus in the first half of this morning's gospel from St Mark referring to Gentiles, to non-Jews, as dogs.

To help us understand what's going on, it's useful to look at the context. Jesus has left Galilee with his disciples and withdrawn to region of Tyre. His public ministry in Galilee has been a roaring success and he is pausing to have some quality time alone with his disciples in a predominantly non-Jewish area, away from the enthusiastic demands of the Jewish crowds who have flocked to hear him preach and teach and to see him perform miracles of healing. But there's no chance of a rest. His reputation has gone before him and now, here, even a Syrophenician woman whose daughter is demon-possessed seeks him out. Why? The answer can be found in my text from Isaiah and the second half of today's gospel. In what amounts to a prophecy in poetic form, Isaiah lists four healing signs that will indicate the arrival of the Messiah: the blind shall see; the deaf hear; the lame walk and the dumb speak. And this is precisely what happens on his return to the area around Decapolis when a deaf man with a speech impediment is healed with a word of power: 'Ephphatha' 'Be opened' (Mark 7v34). The people are excited by the thought that Jesus may well be their long-expected Messiah.

So here we have a Syrophoenician woman, someone who is clearly not a Jew, coming to seek relief for her daughter's distress from the Jewish Messiah and instead of being welcomed and encouraged by offering her healing, Jesus gives her short shrift, not literally saying no but as good as when he says 'Let the children, be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' (7v27) Ouch!

The Hebrew for dog, 'kelab', appears 31 times in the Old Testament usually in fairly pejorative and unfavourable contexts though my favourite may be found in Ecclesiastes 9 v4 which notes with pragmatic realism that 'a living dog is better than a dead lion'. Dogs are only mentioned nine times in the New Testament: five times, the Greek word 'kuon' is used and the contexts aren't very nice either: for example, 2 Peter 2 v22, quoting the Book of Proverbs, uses the image of a dog returning to its vomit. But in Matthew and Mark's account of today's miracle, we have the Greek word 'kunarion'. 'Kunarion' is the diminutive form of 'kuon' and means little dog, a puppy or family pet so perhaps the word used here is affectionate and Jesus is not being as harsh as he first sounds.

So the woman has approached Jesus to ask for his help in curing her daughter. Jesus does not literally refuse but he as good as says no when he observes that in a well run home, the bread on the table is there to feed the children and not to be wasted on the dogs. Undeterred, quick as a flash, she picks up on Jesus' image and replies using it to show that the two thoughts are not incompatible: 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' (7 v28) And Jesus rewards her wit, her faith, her perseverance and her love by exorcising her daughter of her

demon and in doing so shows that he is the Messiah not just for the Jews but for the Gentiles too – in fact, God is a God of all his Creation not simply for the Chosen few.

In today's sermon, therefore, we have seen that not only is Jesus the Messiah but that the people at the time recognised just how special he was because by what he did, he was fulfilling prophecies expected of the Messiah. The people's enthusiasm forced Jesus out of the towns into the countryside and ultimately into non-Jewish area but even here his status is recognised. And in today's use of the word dogs 'kunarion', we see that the kingdom of heaven is not reserved just for one favoured class of people but is there for all.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's Dinard*

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H: Sermon 20: Dogs

