

SERMON: Sunday – 12 February 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Jesus, Pioneer of a Better Faith

Ezekiel 16:1-22

Mark 7:24-37

The relationship between Israel and Yahweh is seen as a love affair where the Lord breathes life into a still born Jerusalem whom he commits to love as she grows.

I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you (9).

I make your beauty perfect (14)

But as Israel grows, she trusts in her beauty and fame rather than in the Provider of all things beautiful. Jerusalem had forgotten her first love, her Lord.

But the Scriptures are full of stories where faith can be found in foreign places and in people considered by Israel as being far from God. People who were certainly not considered beautiful.

But the truth declares that,

Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs (28).

In other words the bread of life feeds all of creation.

The foreign woman said to Jesus, Even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs (28).

Jesus responds to such faith for such faith arises when in the presence of Jesus.

And, as Mark's Gospel puts it,
He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak (37).

Both of today's Bible passages are words about the relationship between God and people.

One commentary said this,

Ezekiel 16 is a long-drawn-out metaphor for the relationship between God and Jerusalem: using the image of husband and wife primarily. As such it is deeply rooted in the patriarchy of the time and the imbalance of power between husband and wife. This is most obvious in the objectification of the female (with Jerusalem personified as the wife).

Never do we hear from the perspective of the wife, we are instead given solely the viewpoint of God as the husband.

There is little in the way of mutuality between the two parties despite the language of covenant. The bride is done to by the husband: taken care of, lavished with gifts, given status. And it is clear that whatever good the bride now has is a result of the husband's splendour. The wife is but a reflection of the husband.

And all is well, within that cultural setting, until something befalls Jerusalem as the wife. Whether or not she had any part in the downfall—be that invasion or illness or abuse at the hands of another—she will be blamed for it as it brings shame upon the honourable husband. The horrifying depiction of a vengeful husband in verses 15- 20 of Ezekiel 16 takes one's breath away. It sounds like an argument in a failing marriage over the kitchen table, with pots and pans ready to be thrown.

God's depiction in this metaphor can only make us question the images of God we use.

Is God vengeful husband, or loving father or both? Or compassionate Saviour?

Which is why we always need to spend time with the person of Jesus; to show us in human terms what the image of the invisible God looks like.

Because Jesus is the Pioneer of a Better Faith.

Passages like these need to be approached prayerfully, asking God in Jesus to speak to us through the Word, in the Spirit, for godliness or godlikeness to be revealed to us and in us.

And the image of God in Jesus maybe isn't always perfect as in today's new testament story, as we'll see in a moment. But it's very human. It's very relatable.

Both these passages in the Scriptures offer us ways to question our assumptions, how we recognise privilege either amongst ourselves or in others, how relationships are complex and need to be nurtured,

and how sometimes there might be inequality or injustice amongst our relationships.

Mark's gospel brings this fascinating encounter between an undaunted Syrophenician mother who refuses to take Jesus' first dismissal of her request to heal her daughter.

Jesus is depicted as aloof and uncaring as he casts her request aside in favour of helping those of his own tribe.

We might defend Jesus by arguing he was exhausted and testy having dealt with so many demands on his attention, but this mother would not relent.

Perhaps we just see Jesus' human side here, which, like us all, has limitations on our capacity to deal with all that faces us.

One rather suspects that when the Syrophenician woman turns the tables on Jesus and his lack of generosity to her by reminding him of his message of abundance, that, even in an exhausted state, he would have smiled in recognition of her truth telling and reminder of the cost of following the Way of the Kin-dom.

But we could also read this moment as a time when the Syrophenician woman learns from Jesus. In that moment in Tyre, Jesus is the outsider, and his people are the minority. He is not in a position of power here, whereas he is on this woman's turf.

Could Jesus have been appealing to a well-connected member of this Gentile community to give his poor followers a chance, to let them feed ahead of the wealthy privileged devouring dogs of that society? Did he see a missional opportunity through this key person in her community?

And, if so, who are the key people in our communities who we need to pray for and connect with?

One of the buzz words around church in these days is pioneering. We have pioneer ministers in post and churches are encouraged to consider being pioneering in their vision and mission.

Jesus might've been the first pioneer of this new faith, boldly going where others would dare to go; a pioneer of a better kind of faith, compared to one which is self serving.

He's certainly teaching his followers something about mission in this everyday encounter, which becomes an opportunity for the Kingdom of God to spread to new places; even though he maybe didn't deliberately go looking for that.

Whether he did or did not it was clear that Jesus vision and mission priority was the Reign of God, announcing and proclaiming the Kingdom of God in the way he lived.

In this kingdom, women and men, girls and boys are all treated with the same love and compassion, the outsider finds a place to call home, the deaf learn to hear words of life and the speechless learn to speak in the language of grace. Everyone feeds from the same Bread. And there's more than enough to go around.

There isn't a place on earth that doesn't need that kind of word and that kind of pioneering, missional, loving service. And Jesus is with us still to lead us in the way.

So, come, we're in the guiding hands of the one who has does all things well.