

**SERMON: 24 November 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**“Changing the Divine Mind - The Widening of God’s Grace”**

**(Isaiah 54:1-10 and Matthew 15:21-28)**

[SLIDE]

### **An Admiring Daughter’s Memory**

Something happened to me when I was little.

My mum told me that a man called Jesus healed me. No one knew what was wrong with me.

She had been desperate  
and when my mum is desperate  
she refuses to take no for an answer.

She had heard that a healer called Jesus was in the district and that he was good, that he knew his stuff.

She had left me with a neighbour  
and gone out to find him.

I heard later that she had given his disciples a hard time until she got to see him face to face;

and when she saw him, they argued—  
that is something my mum is good at—

lots of eye contact and passion.

They both gave as good as they got.

Mum said Jesus really enjoyed it.

It was the kind of conversation he rarely got to have— most of his followers would not have dared!

Mum said that he told her  
that he had only been sent to people of Israel,  
and she was having none of that.

If he was only supposed to heal the people of Israel, what was he doing in Tyre and Sidon?

Then he told her he could not take food  
meant for the children of Israel and give it to dogs. Dogs! He called my mum a dog!

Mum went for him,  
she told him that even dogs get a share  
of what is left over after dinner.

That stopped him and made him think.

She said he looked down at the floor for a minute  
and then he looked her in the face and answered her,  
he said that their argument had made him change his mind, he knew that she

trusted him,  
he would do what she wanted,  
and when she got home she found me healed.

Feisty—that's what they call my mum.  
And to argue with her Jesus must have been a brave man, a brave man and  
an honest one.

(StB Issue 32, 127)

Now, some will read this passage not wishing Jesus to have been proved  
wrong, or for his mind to be broadened. Perhaps this was a test, or was gentle  
humour between the two who were both quick with the jokes. Maybe.

But it is also possible that Jesus was equally human and divine enough to  
have his mind changed (or expanded). Imagine having a God who can  
reimagine the kingdom, make it broader, more generous, more inclusive. It is  
the learning moment that is important. This is what makes faith real, it learns,  
it evolves, it responds to experiences and reinterprets itself, (it grows wider  
and higher and larger; it expands).

It would be a great day if the Reign of Christ was seen to be ever evolving,  
widening, becoming continually more generous and more inclusive when  
someone who finds themselves outside the lines we have marked round our  
religion refuses to take 'No!' for an answer. The kingdom says 'Yes!' and God  
grows.

(StB Issue 32, 126)

Someone reminded me this week of a story Mike Yaconelli told in his book,  
[SLIDE] Messy Spirituality—God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People.  
During World War II, he recounts the actions of a group of soldiers and one  
old priest in the rural countryside of France:

“During an intense battle, one of the American soldiers was killed. His  
comrades did not want to leave his body on the battlefield and decided to give  
him a Christian burial. They remembered a church a few miles behind the  
front lines whose grounds included a small cemetery surrounded by a white  
fence. After receiving permission to take their friend's body to the cemetery,  
they set out for the church arriving just before sunset.

“A priest, his bent-over back and frail body betraying his many years,  
responded to their knocking. His face, deeply wrinkled and tan, was the home  
to fierce eyes that flashed wisdom and passion. Our friend was killed in battle,  
they blurted out, 'and we wanted to give him a church burial.'”

“Apparently the priest understood what they were asking, although he spoke in very broken English. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘but we can only bury those of the same faith here.’ Weary after many months of war, the soldiers simply turned to walk away. ‘But,’ the old priest called after them, ‘you can bury him outside the fence.’

“Cynical and exhausted, the soldiers dug a grave and buried their friend just outside the white fence. They finished after nightfall. They next morning, the entire unit was ordered to move on, and the group raced back to the little church for one final good-bye to their friend. When they arrived, they couldn’t find the gravesite. Tired and confused, they knocked on the door of the church. They asked the old priest if he knew where they had buried their friend. ‘It was dark last night and we were exhausted. We must have been disoriented.’

“A smile flashed across the old priest’s face. ‘After you left last night, I could not sleep, so I went outside early this morning and I *moved the fence.*’”

Jesus, in his lifetime was despised and rejected and killed outside the city walls of Jerusalem. But Christ moves the boundaries of who’s in and who’s out, to bring everyone in.

This is God’s great mystery that was kept secret until Jesus revealed it. The mystery that Paul describes in the letter to the Ephesians.

[SLIDE] God’s secret plan has now been revealed to us; it is a plan centred on Christ, designed long ago according to his good pleasure. And this is his plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ - everything in heaven and on earth.

(Ephesians 1:9-10)

We had some fun this Thursday with that Greek word used to describe this bringing together, (SLIDE), *anakephalaaiosathai*, only because the chapter we were looking at has that name for the title and Rob Bell writes a whole chapter on the meaning of that Greek word - God is retelling everything, recapitulating everything, bringing together everything, healing everything, making whole everything; and in fact God has already done it, and what we’re in the business of is discovering this gospel and sharing this good news which declares that all people are made new in Christ.

[SLIDE] As Paul puts it, “your real life is hidden with Christ in God”.

(Colossians 3:3)

We can find evidence of the human desire to extend influence in the Hebrew Scriptures. A great example is in the first book of Chronicles chapter 4 where

there are two verses about a man named Jabez, so called because his birth had been so painful.

I remember when I lived in Tanzania, I made a great friend whose name was Tabu, which in Swahili means 'trouble' or difficulty; all because his birth had been quite traumatic for his mother. But imagine having to carry that reminder all your life. I think I might be tempted to change my name.

Anyway back to Jabez. The only thing we're told about Jabez is that he prayed to God,

[SLIDE] "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request.

(1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

God appears to like the request for more territory, for influence to be extended, for more coverage, for an increase in the kingdom.

We can't say what Jabez wanted the extended territory for but perhaps it wasn't based on selfish greed for more; it's better to think it was for a noble purpose, to extend the influence of God in a place, or in a people.

Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah points to another story about new birth - and birth is a very real example of enlarging a people -

"Sing, barren woman,  
you who never bore a child;  
burst into song, shout for joy,  
you who were never in labour;  
because more are the children of the desolate woman  
than of her who has a husband,"  
says the Lord.

[SLIDE]

"Enlarge the place of your tent,  
stretch your tent curtains wide,  
do not hold back;  
lengthen your cords,  
strengthen your stakes.  
For you will spread out to the right and to the left;  
your descendants will dispossess nations  
and settle in their desolate cities.

(Isaiah 54:1-3)

This is a word of expansion, [SLIDE] a widening of God's grace, extending beyond what was considered its limit; limited to twelve small tribes in a tiny part of the world called Israel. It's a prophecy of what God would do in the future and Israel was to sing about it and shout for joy.

Things will get sorted; God's reign will extend; the good news of God's grace will spread; as Christ is all and is in all.

Followers of Jesus have the privilege, and the responsibility, of being agents of God's compassion and everlasting, unconditional love in the world; bearing the good news as well as celebrating it wherever it is found in other people.

Frustrated by the stubbornness of the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law, Jesus finds himself compelled by the Spirit out beyond the walls of Jerusalem carrying the message of the kingdom of God elsewhere, beyond the confines of any one religion.

It's in the foreign territory of Canaan that Jesus discovers faith in an unexpected place and an unlikely person. Even the disciples want to send her away because they didn't like her desperate begging for her sick daughter.

She was determined to worship Jesus despite Jesus first response to her that he felt he was only called to the people of Israel.

But God is in this dialogue and God's presence is not exclusively in the person of Jesus the man. Something is happening, which, if not Jesus changing his mind, its at least an enlarging of where the Gospel is going. The good news is spreading; the kingdom is advancing.

Is Jesus seeing the mission of God developing in front of his eyes in the person of this foreign, desperate woman, who won't give up for love of her daughter?

Love never gives up. It always hopes, always perseveres and never fails.

And her request was granted.

It begs the question: where might we see the kingdom of God expanding to; where might we see the Gospel going; who might we see encounter it next?; where might we be prepared to take it?

From Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth. All things, brought together, all people and all things. In Christ, through Christ, for Christ.

More Lord, more. Your kingdom come.