

Trinity 11. 20 August 2023

Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Romans 11:1-2a & 29-32

11 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now ^[k] receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Matthew 15:21-28

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' ²⁴ He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' ²⁶ He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁷ She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Sermon: Encountering the unfailing faithfulness and mercy of God

Encountering the unfailing love, faithfulness and mercy of God. That's what happens to the Canaanite woman in the Gospel today and it's what Paul is writing about in Romans... and it's what I had a little of whilst away on holiday.

I've been back from our 2 week family holiday for a couple of weeks now... but I haven't had a chance to share with you my little encounter with the Lord... an encounter with unfailing love, faithfulness and mercy.

Whilst I was away I wanted to have quality time and fun with the family... but I also wanted some healing. Having had 4 significant fevers in the 18 months and having had my brain fried I was also looking to heal. I was also hoping to be renewed and refreshed in body, mind and spirit. I was chatting to someone the other day about living wholly for Christ and how easy it is to become lukewarm and lacklustre in our faith, in our love and devotion for the Lord. Do you find yourself in that place sometimes.

Well, whether it was tiredness or fatigue or just life I needed an encounter with God on lots of levels!

I managed to get my head into some books and read a book on the Jesus Prayer... "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy." This is the prayer of the blind beggar (Luke 18:35-43) and the tax collector's humble confession (Luke 18:9-14). It's also the prayer of the Lepers (Luke 17:11-19)... and also the prayer of the Canaanite woman in the Gospel today... , 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; **my daughter is tormented by a demon.**'

The woman of course also prays what is probably the most frequently used prayer... "Lord help me!"

Books can often be merely a cerebral activity. However, as I read about the history and understanding, theology and practice of the prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me...” I prayed it! It’s a powerful prayer. Invoking the name of Jesus has power. There is power in the Name of Jesus. As I prayed it things went from head to heart and to the whole body. But... this wasn’t the encounter!

I also started reading Evelyn Underhill’s book on worship. Evelyn was amongst other things an Anglican writer, retreat conductor and mystic who lived from 1875-1941. Her devotional materials are some of the most influential of the 20th Century.

Her book on worship is well worth reading. In it one hears that call, the call of every human being, to connect with the Lord, to connect with the divine. To reach out after God like the Canaanite woman... for encounter with the Spirit for one’s life and indeed humanity to come alive.

Evelyn goes through lots of whys and wherefores of worship across the whole breadth of church history and tradition... looking at the myriad of ways Christians have connected to the Lord in worship. But this wasn’t the encounter either.

It was against the backdrop of reading about the Jesus Prayer and reading Evelyn’s book on worship that Kathy and I attended worship in the local Roman Catholic Church a few weeks ago in Portugal. We’ve been before and try to follow the Portuguese service. This particular Sunday was a baptism and Eucharist. The church was packed, as it always has been when we’ve been, and there was an air of excitement about the baptism and also World Youth Day and the impending visit of Pope Francis.

We sat down and the music started. A chap playing a simple guitar and his daughter singing and his son giving a gentle beat of a drum.

Whoosh.... Encounter! I don’t think Kathy was aware of what was happening with me but there was encounter... in the core of my being.

The tears flowed and I cried throughout the time. It was captivating, beautiful, simple, authentic... and utterly Spirit filled worship and encounter. I didn’t understand most of the words but I knew the Presence and the Presence drew me, knew me and searched me out. My soul was touched... in a deep deep place by Presence.

The physical and emotional pains and trials of the last few years touched by mercy, my own tiredness, inadequacies, failings and weaknesses as a Vicar, pastor and teacher, husband and father all touched by divine mercy. The anxiety and uncertainty of the world we live in, the pain of pastoral situations, my worries about the challenges of the Christian community globally and church here in our locality... all held by mercy. The lukewarm spirit that was mine was heated up! The faint burning ember of my spirit set on fire! I encountered unfailing love, faithfulness and mercy... reaching out to me, ready and waiting for me when I said “Lord, help me.” Communion itself was such a tangible encounter.

I guess this is what Evelyn Underhill was on about in her book on worship... what worship can and does do... when the outward form and ritual and the inward heart and the Spirit of God all connect you get holy fire and a flow of mercy and grace.

I guess it’s also what the Collect is on about...

The almighty power of God and the heavenly treasure revealed in his mercy and pity.

It’s what the Canaanite woman saw and found in Jesus... in her predicament, in her desperation for her daughter... she encountered God’s love, God’s promises, God’s faithfulness and God’s mercy.

The Romans reading today also has this theme of God's unfailing love, faithfulness and mercy. God has granted the Gentiles salvation, which might leave a few too many Christians thinking that God has moved on from the Jewish people and left them behind. However, Paul is quite clear that God has not left them behind.

And there is an important wider truth that comes from this. Far too many Christians think that God moves on from them and from others! God's moved on from the Roman Catholics. God's moved on from the C of E. God's moved on from the West. God's moved on from....???

God doesn't desire to leave anyone behind! "I will never leave you or forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5) He's not into abandoning those he has called and chosen. He wants ALL people to be saved and come to a knowledge of him (1 Tim 2:4). Without going into a full exegeses of Romans... these verses are a wonderful celebration and reminder of God's promises, God's love, God's faithfulness and God's mercy to the world... and therefore it is for me and for you. God doesn't want to leave us behind and abandon us. He wants me and you to encounter his love and mercy!

"But my situation is too hard.

I'm so rubbish and no good.

I'm too sinful

I'm made too many mistakes.

I'm too old. I'm too young.

It's a waste of time expecting God to do anything.

The world in bondage to sin, evil and decay – and God's going to squish it!"

NO!

As one commentator says,

"Regardless of the complexities of understanding the presence in creation of sin and death... we do not live in an amoral, purposeless universe set into motion by a neutral God who idly watches to see what happens. We do not live out lives before a God who from our birth is an angry opponent offering us a limited time opportunity to make the right confession or else be condemned forever. "

NO

The good news is that despite our bondage to decay and imprisonment in disobedience, the God of creation wants most of all for us to have life and wholeness, free from both... free from bondage to decay and free from imprisonment to disobedience. And the God who set the universe into motion ultimately set it up so that justice and mercy might prevail for us all.

Rather than leaving me behind, leaving me in my wallowing, leaving me in my sin, leaving me in my weakness and tiredness God reached out to me and he reaches out to all of us. He doesn't have to do this... but he chooses to do it because he loves me and you... he loves his creation and will do all he can to bring us into the glorious liberty of the children of God. When we reach out to him he responds.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:13) Of course whether we respond to him and reach out to him is another matter and another sermon.

Have you encountered the unfailing love, faithfulness and mercy of God of late? Do you need to?