

SERMON FOR TRINITY 10 | 20 August 2017

It is the middle of August. Not a time – necessarily – for anything very extraordinary to be happening. Pack-Up was busy enough but perhaps had to rely on rather too few volunteers; I had an interesting discussion with Fr Stephen about the place of Jesus' mother during the Tuesday morning Mass. A lovely family asked me to take next week's funeral and there was good, and then much less good news about Celia Marshall. Against the endless banging and drilling down in the basement – the flat is being massively upgraded in time for Peng and Lenka's arrival in two week's time (long overdue!) - I have been rewriting the parish website – and I finally got to my very first Prom on Thursday night. Nothing particularly remarkable about any of that.

And then, from what felt like nowhere, I received an email from a member of the congregation, telling me they were leaving; they were moving on. They weren't happy here.

And it took me a while to recover. This was someone I had counted as a friend and they have been part and parcel of the parish for a good number of years and yet hadn't told me how they felt. Of course it hurt.

And it was in that state of mind that I looked at today's Gospel. As you know, we don't get to choose the readings for Sundays; that is the way we listen to God because if we picked the passages from the Bible, we would stick to the ones we like and would miss vast swathes of the story that we need to hear.

So the Gospel for today is a slightly strange one. Jesus is taking time out with the disciples and is rather further away from home than usual. He has crossed into the coastal area which gave birth to the great Phoenician culture – world travellers, manufacturers and traders. Tyre was an international city. Most of the population wasn't Jewish; 'Canaanite' is a term which reminds us of the peoples that lived in the area before Abraham.

But the woman has the measure of Jesus and she speaks to him with huge respect, calling him Son of David.

The disciples are embarrassed; this is down-time for Jesus and they want him to send her away so that he can rest. But his reply to the woman isn't a simple yes or no; he makes a theological point. He was sent to care for the lost among God's chosen people - not some loud foreigner!

But this gives her time: she falls down at his feet, obviously out of her mind because her daughter is seriously ill. She points out that, given who he is, he can help her if he wants to. And so the dialogue continues. Jesus repeats that he is there to help the people of Israel; the saying about giving food to the dogs isn't as harsh as it sounds, it is just a figure of speech. In any case she doesn't take offence. She comes straight back to him: he can care for her and her daughter and still do the work he was called to do... matching him, point for point with her comments about the crumbs.

And Jesus is clearly touched. Touched by what? Her persistence.

Because persistence in the face of disappointment or difficulty is a sign. So we get these lovely words: *Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.* St Matthew quickly wraps up this little episode with the words: *And her daughter was healed instantly.*

Persistence. 'Going on going on'. 'Keep calm, carry on'. How often in the Bible we have this idea underpinning a story. Despite all appearances Noah was to build that Ark; even over 40 years the people of Israel were to continue until they reached the Promised Land; Isaiah and Jeremiah both tell of God's promise that the people would be released from exile. As people of faith they were to 'carry on' regardless.

And if they carried on, something significant would happen – not just eventually but now, during the journey, as part of the process.

It was in 1964 that the French Canadian, Jean Vanier, was invited to visit a men's mental asylum. He records in his diary: *it was a horrific place, full of screaming and violence; and yet it filled me with a sense of wonderment. I sensed in these men a great cry – Do you love me? Will you come back?*

He goes on: *what I love about the story of the Good Samaritan is that he didn't waste time weighing up the pros and cons, he did something.*

Within weeks Jean Vanier also 'did something'. He bought a tumbledown old cottage and then invited two men with handicaps to leave the asylum and live with him. There was no big idea, no intention to change the world. He just wanted to ease the pain of those two men. He called their new home 'L'arche', the Ark.

But it didn't take this ex-naval officer long to discover that it was he who was being gently transformed by his two house-mates. Developing the ideas of St Paul he wrote: *God has chosen the weak and the foolish to confound those caught up with living purely in their heads. My companions have taught me to live from the heart, to escape the tyranny of normality. They have become teachers of tenderness.*

There are now 143 L'Arche communities around the world, set in 35 countries as diverse as Zimbabwe, Palestine, Uganda and the UK. In each one 'normal people' act as assistants to those with various handicaps. In Trosly where Vanier still lives, the community also offers times of retreat. And he often begins by asking three questions: **Where are the poor in my life? Who are the poor to me? How am I the consoler for the weak and the suffering?**

Vanier goes on: *you see, by opening ourselves to the pain of other people we are able to see that suffering and joy are so closely related that they offer most - when they are held together. I know how much suffering some people are carrying: yet I believe we are only able to share real joy when we embrace deeply the suffering of others.*

It has been an ordinary week, a great mix of events and emotions - glimpses of life and hope, aspiration and yes, disappointment too.

But what our parish life must be about, above all things, is not what we have managed to achieve but whether we have communicated how much people matter – and how beautiful they are. As Vanier says, *to love people is to reveal to them that they are more beautiful than they dared to believe about themselves. When we have persisted with trying to do God's work – sometimes against the evidence.*

Telling people they matter: isn't that the gift that Jesus gave to the Canaanite women – the gift he gives to all who persist ... lovingly.