



Abington Pastoral Letter No.26 22.08.2020

Dear Friends

I hope you are having a very good and lovely weekend. I have had a very busy week. It has been like this since I came back from my Paternity Leave. More meetings are now happening on Zoom. I am receiving now more requests for pastoral visit or for ministerial support. I have also been recently asked to be the supervisor for a curate in the Deanery by the Diocese. All of these are happening on top of what's been going on since the lockdown began. It feels like as if some elements of our life that used to make our life so busy are now coming back while other elements of our life that used to help us to unwind and relax are still restricted. I am sure it is not only me who feels this way. As I said before, it would be very important that we take extra care and time to balance our life, to make our life pattern sustainable to look after ourselves and others in this Pandemic.

Once we resume our public worship (initially in the churchyard and eventually in the church building), my letter to you will come when there is an update or news to share rather than on a weekly basis as it has been for the last 6 months. I still intend to talk to you through this letter as often as possible. Instead there will be more opportunities for us to pray together, worship together and share support with each other both online and offline. I will explain further below.

Open Churchyard Service from 30th August onwards

As announced, we are planning to have our first open churchyard service on Sunday 30th August at 10 am. It would be very helpful if you could give Dianne a ring (01604 281264) so that we would know how many we will have on the day. You are welcome to freely walk around and chat throughout the whole service as you keep the social distancing. If you wish to sit down then please bring your own chairs or picnic blankets as we have limited numbers of chairs in

the church. But if you are unable to bring one then please don't worry as we will help you. Please just let Dianne know so that we can make preparations.

If it rains on the day then please do not come to the church. The service will be broadcasted from inside of the church building. I will also send out the email to confirm either on the day or the day before.

We have had a little trial run this afternoon and it is looking good than we thought it might be. A big thank you to Peter, Donald, Dianne, Bob and Andrew for their very generous help and support. I look forward to seeing you all on the day and worshiping together with you.

Singing is now possible not for all but at least for some

The government has updated its regulations and the national church has announced that now it is possible for the choir to sing in the church building. They will have to of course keep the social distancing but it is now possible. Tim and I already have started our discussion. Choir practice also can now go ahead with safety measures. Congregational singing is still not allowed. But we are glad that we can listen to our choir's singing again. In fact, our choir never stopped singing. And we are so blessed to have such a wonderful choir and Tim. I give thanks to God for their dedication, passion and creativity which reminded us that God is with us in these challenging times.

Chaplaincy at St. Christopher's

Sarah, Revd. Rachel and I have been talking about supporting the residents and staff at St. Christopher's. Since the lockdown began they have been shielding themselves. It has been truly humbling to walk alongside them as I witness the sacrifice, dedication and hard work made by the staff and the residents at St. Christopher's. Revd. Rachel has started visiting the residents during my paternity leave which is hugely appreciated. A big thank you to Rachel and Sarah. We now think it is possible to organize a small communion service every week and a regular pastoral work for the residents from September.

I am also aware that ever since the lockdown began, many folks living in St. Christopher's ground have been keeping the life of worship going at St. Ragener's Chapel. A big thank you to Catherine who have been leading this. I am now making plans to resume the Eucharist at St. Ragener's chapel for the independent residents in St. Christopher's ground. Although we will offer open

churchyard service for all, I know some of us may not be able to come to that service. A service at St. Ragener's chapel will provide another opportunity for those who might find coming to the church challenging to still worship. More details will follow later.

Harvest 4 October

This year's Harvest Sunday will be on 4th of October. We are planning to have a service in the churchyard followed by a picnic in the churchyard. Everyone will be invited to bring their own lunch box and have a picnic in the churchyard after that service. More details will follow later.

Alison's sermon on Matthew 15.21-28

Here is Alison's sermon on last Sunday.

What on earth are we to make of this morning's Gospel reading? A woman with a desperately ill child comes to Jesus for help and gets called a dog for her pains. Is this the Jesus who told his disciples to let the children come to him? Or who went out of his way to befriend the outcast? Who wasn't afraid to touch lepers and to associate with the "unclean"? What is going on?

Let's look at the story again.

Jesus has left the region of Galilee and gone into the area around Tyre and Sidon – in other words into Gentile territory. He'd had a bit of a spat with the Pharisees and teachers of the law (not for the first time) about what constituted "clean" and "unclean" so maybe he wanted to let things cool down a bit. The woman who comes to him is a Canaanite – a Gentile. She has clearly heard that Jesus is a man who can cure the sick – so his fame has spread as far as the Gentile lands. This woman has a desperately ill daughter and she asks Jesus for help. She wants him to heal her daughter.

But Jesus doesn't even acknowledge her presence. He doesn't say a word. You can imagine that many people would have gone away in disgust at this point. And you can just imagine the conversations with her friends. "I went to see that Jesus fellow we've heard so much about. I thought he might be able to cure my daughter. But he wouldn't even speak to me." She would have been perfectly justified in being angry at his rudeness and unhelpfulness – especially after all that she had heard said about him.

But she doesn't go away. She believes so strongly that he can cure her daughter – perhaps that

he is her daughter's only hope – that she keeps on asking. The disciples – tolerant as ever! – are fed up of the way she is hanging around, crying for help, and they ask Jesus to send her away. In reply he says that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.

Now hold on! It looks very much as though Jesus is refusing to help her because she is of the wrong race. And that's a pretty shocking thought, especially at a time when we are all being made to think about racial equality and what it really means.

We are all familiar with the idea of Jesus befriending and spending time with the rejected and the outcasts. Yet here he seems to be saying that he is interested in the outcasts and the rejected only as long as they are Jewish. It's only the lost sheep of Israel that matter.

It's not clear whether this remark about being sent to the lost sheep of Israel is addressed to the disciples or to the woman, but it seems to be pretty conclusive either way – he's not going to help her. Again she might have given up at this point and slunk away, rejected and without getting what she wanted.

But no. She is one determined lady! She throws herself at Jesus' feet and begs him to help her. Then follows this extraordinary conversation. Jesus says that it is not right to take food from children and give it to the dogs.

Now at the time of Jesus the word "dog" was used as a term of contempt. To a Jew it meant a Gentile, to a Greek it meant a dishonourable or shameless woman.

You can just imagine the disciples sniggering when they heard what Jesus said. You can imagine the woman flushing with shame at the implication, feeling humiliated by what Jesus has said to her.

But still she is not to be put off. In fact she answers back – yes, but the dogs can eat the crumbs that are left over by the children. The dogs can eat what the children reject.

And at this point Jesus commends her for her faith and grants her request!

So what is the point of this story?

Well first of all, let's look at the woman. She was not prepared to give up. She wanted what Jesus could offer her so much that she was prepared to be humiliated. But she was also prepared to fight her corner. She wanted Jesus to help her and she was ready to put aside her own feelings to get that help.

So we might ask ourselves, how much do we want what Jesus can offer? How much are we prepared to put up with to get what he gives? And how much are we prepared to accept what he offers, even when it isn't what we have asked for?

The woman got what she wanted because she wanted it so much and she believed that Jesus could provide it. And she was prepared to do whatever it took to persuade Jesus to meet her needs. We don't have to beg. We only have to ask, and be prepared to let Jesus help us. But we do have to be prepared to let him help us in his way and on his terms, and to accept that he knows best. He will meet our needs, not always in the way we expect or at the time we specify, but always in the way that is best for us. And at the time that is right. So often we want what we want RIGHT NOW. Yet we may have to wait, to wait patiently for God's greater purposes to be fulfilled. We might have to work and pray for something that we might not even see happen in our lifetime.

In the early 19th century many Christians agreed that slavery was evil and that it would have to stop, but not many wanted it to happen just then. (A bit like St Augustine's famous prayer – Lord make me chaste, but not yet!) But people like William Wilberforce worked and prayed that the thing that many thought would happen in the future might happen in their lifetime. And it did. But even if it hadn't, their prayers and work would have been part of the process. It would not have been in vain.

Like the woman, we need to be faithful and persistent, but we also need to be obedient and accepting of God's will. But as well as thinking about the woman, we need to look at Jesus' part in this story.

Why was he so dismissive? Well perhaps he wanted to know how strong the woman's faith was, how deeply she believed he could help her. But why so rude? Well what we don't know, of course, is how these words were spoken. What his tone of voice was. How he looked at the woman. We all know that how something is said can alter the meaning – as when I address my middle child as "pilchard". It's a term of affection (honest!) and is taken as such (mostly!). So perhaps Jesus' tone robbed the words of their sting. Certainly the woman was not afraid to answer back! And, as so often, we see Jesus commending someone, not for their way of life or their moral uprightness, but for their faith.

But what about this conversation about food and children and dogs? What is that all about?

The Jews believed that the Messiah was to be theirs and theirs alone. That they were the chosen people of God and no-one else mattered. And Jesus seems to be upholding that, when he says

that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.

The thing is, Jesus knows that he has a specific calling – to make God's own chosen people aware that God's promises are being fulfilled. We hear it again and again – the Kingdom is at hand. God's promises will be for the whole world – yes – but they have to come through the people of Israel first, otherwise why did God choose them?

The Canaanite woman gets this. She addresses Jesus as "Son of David" – a title used by the Jews for the Messiah. And she agrees that the dogs can't share the children's food – the children get first dibs if you like. Or first refusal. But the dogs can eat the scraps. The blessings that the Messiah offers first to Israel will eventually be for the whole world.

The acceptance of Gentiles on an equal footing to Jews was one of the first battles fought within the earliest days of the church. And as we know, the battle was won, thanks to the work of Paul in particular. But time and again in the Gospels Jesus shows signs that his message will be for everyone. For Jew and Gentile, for all races, all classes of society. For the homeless, the outcast and the alcoholic as well as for the prosperous and respectable. For the prisoner and the drug addict as well as for the pillar of society. For the Aids victim, the manic depressive and the mentally handicapped as well as for the fit and healthy. For the desperately poor and the filthy rich and all in between. For the Olympic medallist and the musical prodigy and those with no apparent talents. For the academic high fliers and for those who can barely read or write. The message of the Gospel is for everyone.

And throughout the New Testament, we see the Gospel message being accepted and welcomed by just those who were most despised and rejected. The Jewish authorities – the "children" – didn't want to know, but the Gentiles – the "dogs" – did, as we see when we read about Paul's journeys and teaching. The rich rejected much of what Jesus said, but the poor and the outcasts fell upon his words and took them to their hearts.

Many people today think that they have no need of God. But those who turn to him in faith, in whatever circumstances, will never be rejected. The Gospel message is still for everyone. And we, as a church, are required to remember this, and to look for ways to welcome and encourage those who are seeking for God but might not be quite what we are used to.

Exactly how we do this is one of the many challenges that faces us, both now and in the post-Covid world. Like the Canaanite woman, we need faith, persistence and a willingness to think outside the box to seek and perceive the greater purposes of God. Then maybe we too will hear the voice of Jesus saying "You have great faith. Your request is granted."

That is all from me for now. It is getting late. I have been upstairs twice already as I was writing this later because Emmanuel was crying. I also should get some rest for tomorrow's service. Finally may I please ask you to join me in prayer for our town and our borough as it still remains to be a high risk area. We don't need to say many words. Just a simple prayer will do. You can just tweak a little bit the pocket prayer that we have been studying together. Like this.

God, you are good.

I need help. We need help. Our town needs help.

Please be close to those who are ill, afraid or in isolation.

Thank you.

In Jesus name, Amen.

With love in Christ

Jun