

Homily for people and parishes...

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 8th September 2024, Pentecost 16

Readings: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23
James 2:1-10

Psalm 125
Mark 7:24-37

I invite you to close your eyes, take a couple of slow breaths, and as you do this imagine yourself looking at Jesus on a beach, on the shore of Lake Galilee! I'm not joking – please give it a go!

Imagine that you're looking at Jesus on a beach. Fishing boats are dragged up on that beach, and nets are hanging on poles. Imagine the tang of salt in the air, the smell of fish drying, and the feel of a late afternoon breeze. Now look at Jesus who is in conversation with a couple of fishermen. In your imagination... what does Jesus look like? How tall is he, and how long is his hair? What is his skin complexion, and, when you look closely, - what colour are his eyes?

I wonder what has influenced our imaginations, as we've each pictured this man so central to our faith? If you have not done so already – please open your eyes!

Through the centuries artists have offered us pictures of how they imagined Jesus: from colourful murals, to the sober ikons of Orthodox art; from slender figures in stained glass, to the muscular Christ figures of Michelangelo. Of course, more recently we have a stable of good-looking actors who have portrayed Jesus in television series, and big budget movies. Paintings, and sculptures; stained glass, and movies - each leave an impression in our memory and help us to imagine.

Ten years ago, an English and Israeli team used forensic anthropology to create a picture of what an average Semitic man would have looked like at that time. They took three First Century male skulls from the Galilee Region of northern Israel, and using a variety of literary sources, computer imaging, and a medical artist, recreated a face that would not be given much opportunity in Hollywood! Apparently, an average male at that time stood just 5' 1" tall and weighed just under 50 kilograms! In addition, men living in that area usually wore their hair and beards cut short... So, my imaging over the years has been quite inaccurate! Maybe this is also true for you?

Even the Scriptures seem to infer that Jesus looked average – unlike King David who is remembered as being 'ruddy and handsome!' However, it wasn't what Jesus looked like that drew people to him – it was what he said and did. He interpreted the sacred writing of his faith in ways that inspired people and offered them a compelling vision. He unashamedly loved God, and in his love for people seemed to have a soft spot for the

unlovely and the outcast. He challenged hypocrisy and injustice, and he healed many people from distress and disease.

This week's Gospel reading describes Jesus healing a deeply troubled girl, and a man who could not hear, or speak. In each case, somebody other than the sick person asked Jesus for healing on their behalf. For the young girl it was her mother, and for the deaf man it was, presumably, friends, or family. Already there is something for us to think about because we each know people who have need of healing, and wholeness. How do we bring these people to God in prayer, and ask for God's blessing on them?

Of course, there are many ways to do this! Some pray as the Spirit leads them to pray at a particular time, while others organise their prayer in a journal. Some stick post-it notes on the wall with names and situations, while others put their names up on a whiteboard. Some will light a candle and pray as the candle burns, while others pray as they walk or drive. Some will lay hands on the sick person as they pray, while others will ask an ordained minister to pray and anoint the sick person with oil. The important thing is that sick people are remembered and are brought to God in prayer.

If the mother had not come to Jesus with her request – then the girl would not have experienced healing at that time. Similarly, if the deaf man's friends had not brought him to Jesus with their request – then the man would not have been able to hear and speak.

However, there's more in this Gospel than the reminder for us to pray the sick. In the same way that we might idealise the appearance of Jesus, I think we can also idealise his behaviour. The image of Jesus being gentle, meek, and mild is at odds with the initial response that Jesus gave to the mother of the girl in need.

The Gospel tells us that she was not Jewish – but was a Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia. 'What difference would that make?' we might think. She was a mother asking for her sick child to be healed – so surely Jesus would agree. Any number of times Jesus affirmed that children were special to him and to God – so surely, he would respond with compassion and generosity to this request for a child.

However, it seems from his response that where you come from was important back then – in the same way that it seems to be important now. Jesus did not welcome her request or reply with compassion. Instead, he suggested that the healing power he had was for Jewish people only, and not for dogs! We can't gloss over it, he called the woman and her community 'dogs'. In this we might recognise that 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild...' initially responded from prejudice towards the woman because of her ethnicity. It's uncomfortable to think about – but, it seems that when Jesus met this woman his response was racist!

The woman did not get angry or take offence at his racist remark, but instead offered it back to Jesus with wisdom. “Yes...” she said, “...but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Through her response Jesus got a new perspective on who he was called to serve. God’s healing, wholeness, & hope was not just for Jewish people, but for all.

I think it amazing that Jesus was willing to hear new insight about God, and about his life, from a foreigner. It’s more amazing when we remember that she was a woman, and that Jesus belonged to a culture that regarded men more highly than women.

How open are we to the possibility of God speaking to us through the most unlikely people? How willing are we to allow our prejudices to be challenged? And, how open are we to changing our point of view?

The Aramaic word that Jesus used when he prayed for the deaf man was, “*Ephphatha!*” which means, “Be opened!” I think it is a great ambition for us to take into prayer this week! May our hearts and minds be opened by God’s Spirit to recognise the personal prejudices within us that need to change; and may that same Spirit lead us to pray for those in our community, and in our world, who have need of healing.

Would you please join me as I close now in prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and the gift of your love. In the light of the Gospel today we ask your blessing on those people we don’t like and pray for the grace to see them through your eyes. We pray in the name of the one who said ‘be opened’, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen