

## **A Podcast for North Coventry Group – August 16 2020 ('Eleventh after Pentecost')**

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 16 August, the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Isabel, Mandy and Bill for their help in preparing this week's edition.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to share most of the material in this edition with Hearsall Baptist Church, Coventry, for use in their online worship this weekend.

Our introit is a setting of the Aaronic blessing, by John Rutter.

**Introit<sup>i</sup>** – *The Lord bless you and keep you* by John Rutter,  
sung by The Cambridge Singers, conducted by John Rutter  
from the album *John Rutter, the Ultimate Collection*

**Call to Worship:** Words from Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us,  
that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.  
May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you.  
May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly  
and guide the nations of the earth.  
May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you.  
Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us.  
God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.

Amen

A hymn of praise – *Let all the world, in every corner, sing.*

**Hymn:** Let all the world, in every corner, sing [sung by the York Minster Choir, on the album *Best-loved hymns from York Minster*]

*Let all the world in every corner sing, "My God and King!  
The heavens are not too high, God's praise may thither fly  
the earth is not too low, God's praises there may grow.  
Let all the world in every corner sing, "My God and King!"*

*Let all the world in every corner sing, "My God and King!"  
The church with psalms must shout: no door can keep them out  
But, more than all, the heart must bear the longest part.  
Let all the world in every corner sing, "My God and King!"*

### **Prayers**

Let us pray

Lord God, as we come before you now, we open our hearts to you.  
Help us to see that we can learn so much from others, even from those with whom we  
think we don't have much in common.

Make us willing to stand out from the crowd, to hear your voice, and act upon it.

Living Lord, we praise you that you are a God who loves.  
You love everyone equally, and we thank you that we are each unique.  
We thank you that each one of us has so much to give – and to receive – from each other. Thank you for each new experience that you give us.

Lord, sometimes we appear to be listening to others, but our attention wanders.

Sometimes we are too distracted by our own concerns and listen only to those who tell us what we want to hear.

Sometimes we don't listen to people because we don't like them or because they are different to us.

Sometimes we don't listen to you Lord, because we are too busy, or because we are afraid of what you might say to us.

Forgive us Lord, for missed opportunities. Amen

And we speak to God now in the words that Jesus taught us:

### **The Lord's Prayer**

*Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

**Scripture<sup>ii</sup>:** Isaiah 56, v1 and vv6-8

This is what the Lord says:

"Maintain justice and do what is right,  
for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.

<sup>6</sup> And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him,  
to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him,  
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—

<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

<sup>8</sup> The Sovereign Lord declares— he who gathers the exiles of Israel:  
"I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."

**Scripture:** Matthew 15.21-28

<sup>21</sup> Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

<sup>23</sup> Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

<sup>24</sup> He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

<sup>25</sup> The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

<sup>26</sup> He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

<sup>27</sup> “Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

## Reflection (1)

In the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, we are reminded of a rather unpleasant truth. The Jews of Jesus’ day lived in a land that once upon a time they had taken over by force. They lived in a land in which they were perhaps numerically dominant but in which multiple races co-existed under the control of the Roman occupying forces. They lived in a land which they counted as theirs but which other races felt they had a hand in, too, and had a right to live in.

Sounds familiar? Of course it does.

There are a number of places in the world today where multi-racial societies have grown up, where people of different ethnicity and different faith co-exist. In many places this doesn’t cause much of a problem. There are quarters of our city that are almost defined by the racial background, and hence religious background, of their inhabitants, but Coventry in 2020 is not a seething hotbed of inter-racial strife.

Elsewhere in the world, it is a different story. We see wars inspired by the inability of people to get on. We had our rather muted celebrations of the 75th anniversary of VE Day back in May. More recent armed conflicts and national upheavals may not have been world-wide, but they have all too often featured enmity between people sharing the same living space but coming – originally – from different ethnic roots. Without any research at all we can all think of such problems in Kosovo and in Bosnia which have ended in war. Obvious racial differences underscore the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that continues to have its twists and turns, and the treatment by China of the Uighur Muslim minority is a current international scandal.

There is an awful lot – emphasis on the word “awful” – an awful lot of racially-motivated conflict in the world.

And in the midst of all this we turn to our readings – and we find even Jesus appearing reluctant to share his love and use his power in the interests of a Canaanite woman!

Who were the Canaanites? The answer is that it depends when you look. To echo Tim Rice’s words from “Joseph” – *Way, way back many centuries ago, not long after the Bible began, Jacob lived in the land of Canaan, a fine example of a family man.* God’s chosen people both went to and came from Canaan.

The land of Canaan, way, way back, was a region spreading roughly between what we now call Egypt and Lebanon, so although the towns that Jesus was visiting were in an area they called Phoenicia, this Canaanite lady was at home. And yet folk from Israel, that is to say from Judah, and from Galilee, were touring round. Distance-wise, we are about 40 miles north of other places Jesus frequented, quite a way.

But you wouldn’t have thought, whether it was near or far, that the Holy Spirit at work in and through Jesus would have had “no-go areas”, would you?

The basic story is that the woman begs Jesus for help for her sick daughter. Jesus ignores her. Opinion is divided whether the disciples ask him to help her so that she will stop bothering them, or whether they just think she should be dismissed. Jesus appears to try to excuse himself from intervening:

*He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."*

I am not your resource, he seems to say. I am not at your disposal.

But she perseveres.

*The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.*

He gets abusive – even insulting.

*He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."*

Was this really the way that Jews regarded the other inhabitants of their country? Humans against dogs? Again she perseveres – this insult is like water off a duck's back, it seems.

*"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

So Jesus is worn down.

*Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.*

All's well that ends well.

But why do this? With a thought Jesus could cure the girl. With a thought he did. Was there a finite reservoir of love that he had, to hand out? We believe not – that's not the sort of God we believe in.

And before we think some more about what this curious incident means, let's hear a song from Graham Kendrick that celebrates the universal nature of the church and of Jesus' message.

**Music:** *From the sun's rising* by Graham Kendrick  
sung by Graham Kendrick  
from the album *Crown Him*

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript, although they can be found online if you are so equipped.]

## **Reflection (2)**

So why did Jesus seem so reluctant to respond positively to the request of the Canaanite woman? Was he doing it as a test of her faith – or of the disciples' own prejudices?

There is a parallel of sorts with that time that Jesus encountered the Centurion with a paralysed servant, recounted back in Matthew chapter 8. The Centurion doesn't ask Jesus to go to his home; rather he believes in the power of Jesus to simply say the word in order to bring about healing.

Again it is someone asking on behalf of someone else. In that story the foreigner is used, if I can put it that way, to shame the nation of Israel. In today's story the foreigner is used almost to shame Jesus into giving her something she wants.

But the clue to what we are really talking about lies in Jesus final comment to this Canannite woman.

28 Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Faith is not just a blind belief that God – or Jesus - will sort us out. It is not just trust. It is not just putting our lives into someone else's hands, though there ought to be elements of hope, belief, trust and letting-go in our faith.

It is, I believe, a more comprehensive thing. It embraces understanding of God's purposes and alignment of our lives and attitudes with them. So I think that Jesus saw that this woman had seen part of the bigger picture. The bigger picture of God. God who, even back in the time of Isaiah was saying,

"... my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

The Sovereign Lord declares— he who gathers the exiles of Israel:

"I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."

At that time the implication was that God's blessing was available to all those who turned to him and served him in the terms laid out in Moses' time and developed through the years. Whatever the detail, the implication was that it was not just the Jews who would have access to God, who would, in Isaiah's phrase, be gathered to him.

So the seeds of the more inclusive church, the church that reached out after the death of Jesus to Gentiles as well as to Jews, were sown.

You may or may not find allusions to the racial mix of first-century Roman occupied Palestine interesting, but of course the beauty of the simplicity of the message of Jesus is that it still applies today.

Like another Gospel derived rule – by their fruits you will know them – it is by the words and especially the actions of the varied people we meet or associate with on a personal, local, national or even global scale that we come to see what they are like and whether they are to be encouraged or accepted. Whether we should ally ourselves with them or oppose them. It is especially relevant as we continue in a phase of the world's life when labels are all too often applied to people - Western, Eastern, White, Black. At a time of global pandemic, it is all too easy to seek to lay the blame for what is happening at the feet of other nations and peoples.

You can't tell what people are like by looking at their passports or following them to their place of worship! To see what people are like you should look at how they speak and what they do. And the invitation to be people of God is universal. Amen.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Dear Lord,

We know that your good news is for all. No-one is beyond the bounds of your love and your care.

We pray for all who doubt this, or who feel that there is no good news to be had.

For those made despondent by the re-tightening of lockdown restrictions. It's been tough to be so limited in our freedom of movement or our freedom to engage with others. And following the relief brought about by the small steps towards what we used to take for granted, it somehow feels even worse when those concessions are taken away. Be with all who have had to change their holiday plans or who have to endure unexpected periods of quarantine. Bless those who have planned social engagements or leisure activities that must now be cancelled again.

We pray for those becoming ill with Covid-19 and for those caring for them. While the numbers may be fewer than at the peak of the pandemic, every sick person matters to you and those who love them. Help us never to view the climbing number of casualties as mere statistics but to remember that all are individuals worthy of remembrance and be with all who mourn. Be with all who care for them too, whether in hospital or in care home settings, and give those who have worked throughout the pandemic the strength to continue.

Someone said wisely that through these months we have all been riding the same storm, but we have not all been doing that in the same boat. We pray for all who have worked throughout these difficult months, whether in their usual setting or at home. We pray for those who have been put on furlough, and who have had the uncertainty of reduced pay and changing plans over when they will be back at work. We pray for those who have lost their jobs already or who are fearful that this may yet be their experience. And we pray for those who were not working and who may have been less affected by the disruption and ask that they show understanding to those who feel their world has been turned upside down.

We pray for all in positions of authority in the churches. Those preparing worship in new ways, and those endeavoring to restore old ways of worshipping, in a massively altered world. We know that the wishes, the hopes and the expectations will vary. Help us all to be tolerant of others whose views differ from our own.

In all this, we remember that we are all different, that you know us, and you know our hearts. Help us all to share the good news with others and to build our new future together in love. Amen,

**Hymn:**            *In Christ there is no East or West*  
                         recorded by the Marlborough College Chapel Choir,  
                         taken from their album *Complete New English Hymnal, Volume 2*

*In Christ there is no East or West,  
in him no South or North,  
But one great fellowship of love  
throughout the whole wide earth.*

*Join hands, then, lovers of the faith,  
whate'er your race may be;  
who serves my father as a child  
is surely kin to me.*

*In Christ now meet both East and West,  
in him meet South and North,  
All Christlike souls are one in him  
throughout the whole wide earth.*

Words by John Oxenham, altered

## **Blessing**

Lord, in the coming days, may we be ready to serve you and to find you in the people we meet, even when we seem to have little in common with them.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

**Music:**            *Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, K. 550: First movement (excerpt)*  
by Mozart, performed by the Academy of Ancient Music  
conducted by Christopher Hogwood

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### **Credits**

*The Lord bless you and keep you* by John Rutter was sung by The Cambridge Singers, conducted by John Rutter and taken from the album *John Rutter, the Ultimate Collection*

*Let all the world, in every corner, sing* was sung by the York Minster Choir, on the album *Best-loved hymns from York Minster*

*From the sun's rising* by Graham Kendrick was sung by Graham Kendrick from the album *Crown Him*.

*In Christ there is no East or West* was recorded by the Marlborough College Chapel Choir, and taken from their album *Complete New English Hymnal, Volume 2*

An excerpt from the first movement of Symphony No. 40 by Mozart was performed by the Academy of Ancient Music conducted by Christopher Hogwood, from the album *Mozart Symphonies numbers 31 and 40*.

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<sup>i</sup> All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

<sup>ii</sup> Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition