

Sermon Bramley 16 August 2020
Reading Acts 17:22-34 & Matt 15:21-28
Aim Sharing gospel in our culture

Matthew 15

Title slide

Have you ever desperately needed a break?
A bit of time for yourself? A holiday maybe?
Rather pointed issue this summer
Spain = oops: Scottish footballers ...
For us: default = Tunnel, France, camping
This year: just not worth it. Disappointing

Context for Gospel reading **Slide 2**

'Jesus withdrew', busy time of ministry
Specifically chose place with few Jewish
people. Aim = to get away, to rest

A different culture: won't be bothered here
This = link between our readings
Xtn faith crossing cultural boundaries

So, let's look at what happened

Unusual story. Does not unfold as you expect

- A woman gate-crashed their 'Airbnb', their temporary residence
- She came with a burning need: her daughter's health
- Interesting // Covid-19 online searches for prayer massively increased

- CS Lewis wrote (The Problem of Pain):
‘God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world’. Crisis creates motivation. Peculiarly suffering can prove a blessing if it causes us to reach out for a solution
- Also came with surprising faith / insight for someone from outside of Jewish culture:
‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Example of how God goes before / beyond us, producing surprising seeds of faith OUTSIDE of the faith community
- How did Jesus’ followers react? Surely seize this opportunity. Err, no. **‘Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.’** Oh dear! Sadly, happens today too, not always intentional: building off-putting, people don’t know what to do, our own little sub-culture. But some churches are more like exclusive clubs = not how it should be
- At this point, our expectation is: well, at least Jesus won’t let us down. Do better
- His first reaction = silence: a quiet rejection
- By way of explanation, he says: **‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel’**

- Oh dear! Come on, Jesus, you can do better than that
- Interestingly, she did not seem put off. For she then came to him, knelt before him. **'Lord help me'** she said
- Just when you think things cannot get worse, we get what one commentary calls 'that atrocious saying' from Jesus: **'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs'**. Can't say that!
- This is what she might EXPECT from Jew / Jewish leader. In today's news, a 'racial slur'. Jews looked down on neighbours as dogs. Can Jesus really be saying this?
- One of the commentators notes, words on paper do not tell us everything. What was Jesus' body language? Twinkle in his eye? Is this, in any sense, banter? Deliberately provocative speech?
- Her answer suggests maybe it was. 'Yes, Lord' she replied but not in any submissive way. But even the dogs get the crumbs.
- She was not put off & Jesus not only answered her plea but described her as someone of **'great faith'**: higher praise than he gave to anyone else in this way

Slide 3

What can we learn from this strange story?

- Firstly, people are individuals
- This is no set script gospel encounter; has sharp, rather awkward dialogue instead
- Secondly, people coming from way outside might actually have more faith / insights into faith than we expect
- Thirdly: as Church, need to be conscious of barriers we put up, even unintentionally
- We need to work on making our welcome generous and good to people of faith and those seeking to know more
- Our next reading, Acts 17, will show where appropriate challenge comes – focused on Jesus and the gospel, not other barriers

In an alien culture

Slide 4

Returning to the holiday theme ...

You know stereotypes of the British abroad?

- Be u/d: just speak English loudly & slowly
- Read recently: 21 tins baked beans for 3-week trip to France = 1 per day
- Dress sense: socks with sandals and other scandals. Hope these have improved!
- Add up to: failure to enter another culture

Sabbatical June-July

Challenge of sharing gospel in our culture

A culture which has changed a lot

One reading kept coming up for reflection

Acts 17: Paul in Athens

A culture with many competing beliefs, a

factor very recognisable today in West

Paul had wandered around, dialogued in

market places, observed, listened

Knew that his normal approach = Jesus

fulfilling OT Scriptures would cut no ice

Some interesting //s for us

3 aims in this second part of the sermon:

1. How did Paul engage with culture?

2. How did he frame the gospel?

3. What might this mean in a Covid-19 world?

Engaging with our culture

Slide 5

'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious ... I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you'

'Religious' often -ve term in our day but not in theirs. Paul +ve. Heart's desire = to worship

That's a good thing. Paul commends them
But, do you notice, he also picks up an
element of insecurity in their practice?

'To an unknown God' = covering all bases /
hedging their bets / smacks of superstition

Again, it's almost a bit playful, like Jesus
Almost saying: I see that you want to worship
but is there something you're missing here?
Gives him an angle, a way in ...

Then quotes from their poets / philosophers
// would be for us to use songs / films / etc.

Affirms what he can / makes connections
Need to u/d complexity of his audience to
realise why he says what he says:

- One group (Stoics) believed God was in everything. So he begins by emphasising God as Creator & separate from creation.
- How could someone who made all this be restricted to man-made temples or an idol?
- But then, skilfully, had to address another group (the Epicureans): believed God = so remote, he cannot be known.
- No. Here Paul quotes their poets: '**For in him we live and move and have our being**' & '**We are his offspring**'

Can we find similar creative ways to engage?

Framing the gospel message

Slide 6

Firstly, he acknowledges that idols have a way of holding on to us, v30:

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent

People sometimes see the force of the gospel message but still reject it. Why? In 'Questioning Evangelism' Randy Newman: 'People reject the Good News because they are enslaved to other kinds of news. They are in love with something unworthy of such devotion, and it won't let them go'

But then he cuts to the chase & proclaims the resurrection of Jesus as the key fact

He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead

- This is THE stand-out part of Jesus story
- Of course, other parts are vital; but Jesus defeated death (repeat). He lives.
- Paul Weston, 'The Word's Out'; Paul follows the lead of Mark 1.1 & John 1.1. Gospel is stupendous, not reasonable!

What does this offer?

- The possibility of transformation. Suddenly all limits are off, including that one which limits every single human life, i.e. death
- An invitation. We invite people to step into the Jesus story. Alisdair McIntyre 'Tell me your story and I will show you that it only becomes intelligible within this framework'
- Paul took them from 'an unknown God' to the Risen Jesus. Some of them anyway, even if others laughed / not impressed.

Parallels for today

Slide 7

Our world has different idols:

- Our work, homes, families, freedom to travel / move. All good things but capable of becoming idols
- A belief that life (in West, for most) is basically secure & we can fix anything

Covid-19 has turned all that upside down:

- Though we are working towards solutions, initially we've been overwhelmed
- Normal patterns of life vanished overnight
- Death stalks the land / future v uncertain
- Online searches for prayer (unknown God) & visitors to online worship: big growth

Do we have good news for such a world?

Yes, we do:

- There IS hope
- Resurrection = central. Offers hope that cannot even be snatched away by death
- Gives a peace that can sustain anyone
- Invite people to explore this with us

End with a link to our first reading:

What might it mean to welcome people in such a situation?

Part of the answer is almost certainly online

- Some people remain wary of gathering
- Physically we don't have sufficient space, with social distancing
- But also it's also a safe space to gather because you can do it from your own home / bit of a sense of distance / don't have to enter a scary building, etc.
- And we need to remember that young people (especially born after 2000) are 'digital natives': online world is as real for them as meeting up. It's a valid meeting space in our culture.

In all we do, need to engage with our culture, affirming what we can but with challenge & be creative in how we share good news