

16 - 22 August 2020

Listen and understand

Related Bible reading(s): Matthew 15.(10-20),21-28

PostScript: Relax! God is good!

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The Canaanite woman's mention of the scavenging dogs may refer to a theme in God's relationship with the Jews: alongside the injunction to enjoy and be thankful for God's bounty, there was always a command to leave something for the marginalised. Nothing, neither the grain in your fields, nor the olives on your trees (see Leviticus 19.9; Deuteronomy 24.20), was yours unconditionally.

Good husbandry with a controlled surplus resembles what we have noticed this spring and summer in lockdown. Our over-tended environment needed to get back into balance with nature for the sake of the climate and the ecosystems that sustain it. We Covid-19 garden enthusiasts were enjoined to leave briars alone to provide food and habitat for insects, birds and other creatures. Hedgerows have bloomed with native wildflowers where mowing and hedge-cutting have just not happened. Beds in parks and public gardens where formal carpet bedding was the norm have been sown with wild-flower seeds to the delight of bees and butterflies. The environment thrives on benign neglect!

But in our communities, it seems, increased controls, necessary in an epidemic, have produced increased tensions. As we reach mid-August, UK schools start to return, Scotland first. Debates over the relative merits of centralised efficiency and localised pragmatism flare up and turn to fierce arguments. There is distressing turmoil around the 'exam' results which will determine the futures of this year's school-leavers. Some localism has entered the government public health agenda, although, as local bodies take on more contact tracing, ministers still seem to deny that central control is reduced. It can appear that governments' demands for centralised systems are driven by a self-regarding thirst for control and conformity, often followed by a laissez-faire panic. Concern to look good,

comparable with the Pharisees' concern with externals, is followed by a hasty retreat from adverse consequences.

In the story of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5.35-43) we find a circumspect healing, carefully choreographed to respect the child's privacy. Here (Matt 15.28), it seems Jesus simply releases his healing, declaring a new perspective. With anxiety levels so high, can his sensitive choices point us to the same thoughtful adjustments in human affairs, as in our relations with nature? Benign neglect won't help here. We need to replace self-regarding controls with outwardly focused care. BAME people, so disproportionately affected by Covid-19, are fearful, as are the unemployed. Many disadvantaged students, penalised by carefully constructed algorithms, are perplexed and angry. Many local public health officers, teachers and head-teachers, are frustrated. How can we restore calm, and a sense of proportion, and bring healing to our communities?

Perhaps we need to accept, for ourselves, as the New Testament Jews did, that it is not good to try to control every aspect of life. Then we wait, patiently, for better aspects of 'new normal' to emerge, like those flowers!

Prayer

Loving and sustaining Lord, we thank you for the beauty and bounty of your world and its ability to feed our minds and souls as well as our bodies. Communities ravaged by the epidemic are sorely in need of your healing love. Certainties have been torn away, and attempts to replace them in a 'new normal' are proving difficult and often divisive. Give us strength, patience and perseverance. Give us generosity and imagination. Above all ground us in the certainty that your love is there for all, in the 'new normal' as to all eternity. **Amen**

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