

Mark 7.24
'BEYOND THE RAMP'

Nest Sunday, my youngest son a bus driver in Devon, is literally taking a bus-man's holiday.

He'll come to Bromley and drive us back to Devon for a few days. Of course, we won't go from London to Manchester, and then from Manchester down to Devon. He'll set his Sat Nav and travel down to the A303, straight into Devon. A diversion via Manchester would be stupid. Have you ever realised that this is precisely the kind of journey that Jesus took in today's Gospel story. He travelled by a very strange route. We're not told why – we can only speculate.

Perhaps, a long journey, through places where he wasn't well-known, offered peace before the coming storm? Perhaps, he needed a break from the excitement, strain and tension that usually surrounded him. He could consolidate his relationship with his men before the final phase of his ministry.

TREATING

We are told that he found shelter in a house in Gentile territory – away from the pressures of Galilee. But, you can't keep Jesus a secret for very long and inevitably the secret of his identity seeped out. Before long, two people found their way to that house seeking help. Jesus didn't push them aside, even though they didn't fit in with his plans for that period of time. He treated each as an individual – with patience and compassion.

I don't know what *you* make of the to-and-fro conversation between Jesus and the feisty Canaanite mother. Personally, I don't think we should equate this with a heated Oxford Union debate. I see it more as playful banter – like my brother and me bouncing ideas off one another as children. As I see it, Jesus isn't putting her down when he refers to her as a 'dog' – he's just using a common Jewish slang term for Gentiles.

I reckon that Jesus is communicating that *after* 'the children' – the Jewish people – have discovered their Messiah, that it will *then* be the turn of the Gentiles. He's emphasising that his priority is bringing God's salvation to the Jews. Then, and only then, the Jews, in turn, will share this great treasure with the Gentiles.

So, here we have Jesus with these two who've come seeking healing. There's the man who's so deaf that his speech is severely distorted – we're told his tongue was, metaphorically, 'tied up in knots'. Jesus doesn't bellow at him at the top of his voice, he empathetically explains what he's going to do by acting it out – and the man is healed and can hear and speak like everyone else.

LEAPING

I'm touched by how *inclusively* Jesus acted in healing both these Gentiles – both might have been shut out – but Jesus welcomed them. The Messiah really has come, and is fulfilling Old Testament prophecies – like the ones on today's reading... Feeble hands are strengthened, unstable knees steadied, blind eyes opened, deaf ears unstopped, lame people leap deers, and mute tongue shout for joy. Wow!

It seems that at this time, Jesus was getting his act together for the climax of his life's work, and was focussing on his task of bringing salvation to the Jews - but he still had enough time and energy to help two from outside the Jewish fold - the deaf man and the woman's daughter.

Today is 'Ability Sunday'. We've just thought about Jesus' attitude to disability. We've seen how he went out of his way to include those two Gentiles - two who didn't really fit at that moment in time. It raises questions about our attitudes towards those who we might say are 'differently abled', or in simpler language, like me, are 'disabled'.

Church should be a place where everyone feels they really *belong*. Dare we confront the question, 'Are some excluded from fully belonging to the whole life of Bromley parish church by being too young, too old, or disabled?'

TRUMPING

Our Archbishop, Justin Welby states, 'Without the presence, experience and skills of disabled people, we are incomplete. That is true in the church and in wider society. It is our calling to work to build the most effective routes to participation at every level of society. *Disability and accessibility should trump heritage.*'

I'll repeat his words, '*Disability and accessibility should trump heritage.*'

How might we work more fully towards making sure that disabled people feel that this church is a place where they can fully belong and be at home. It goes without saying that home is a place where there's a chair comfortable enough to sit on when you're in pain - which doesn't exacerbate it as church pews do for those of us living with chronic pain.

It's been said that 'Belonging is being missed when you're not there.' Or in the words of a disabled journalist, 'It's being missed for who you are, not a sigh of relief because the disabled person hasn't turned up.'

ISOLATING

I'm not talking about us being Lady Bountiful and patronisingly 'doing good' to 'needy' people. I'm talking about something much harder... about opening our eyes to recognise that disabled people possess wonderful gifts and talents they'll share with us, if we make it possible for them to do this. We may take one look and simply write people off. This is an isolating experience for disabled people wanting to pursue their faith journey and share their talents within the church.

Here, you manage physically to get us into church, by having disabled access at the back. But, sadly, the access door is too heavy for some of us to push open - especially if we're using a walker or two sticks - we have to ring the bell and be let us in. A bit humiliating! Some receive a message, 'Not completely welcome'.

Once we're through the door the story really begins. We've a sound system so we can hear, white lines so we don't fall over steps, large print service sheets so we can read, and a disabled loo - *but* this is the beginning and not the ending we might assume it to be. It's here the real story begins.

How are we at Bromley parish church making sure that our 'differently abled' members have the opportunity of playing a full part in church life? How much thought have we been able to give this?

CELEBRATING

In my previous church, I was more handicapped than now. You can't imagine my joy when Norman, the church-warden found a high kitchen chair, screwed it onto a platform, so that I could sit behind the Nave altar, and celebrate Communion and preach.

Imagine my joy here, after ankle surgery when I wasn't allowed to stand, that Anne Jablonski invited me to preach, sitting on my mobility scooter, at the front of the church. Do you remember how, at the end of the service, she swept me up on my scooter to drive out in the final procession behind the choir.

Arthritis, Fibromyalgia and reduced eyesight due to Glaucoma haven't removed my capacity and calling as a priest – but we've all had to be very creative about how I could best be used.

I've felt welcomed and wanted here - by Martin's white lines springing up in places where I might fall over, and by Anne Tree's supporting arm when she notices I might wobble and fall. You know how to make me feel at home here.

CHALLENGING

Can we create a place of welcome here, where all disabled people are similarly

- * welcomed and supported,
- * can express themselves and gain confidence,
- * can we offer friendship and communal experience.
- * Are we ready to become a (so called) 'Dementia friendly church'?
- * Might we welcome more disabled people more fully in the worship, work and life of our church?

Some of us might find this costly. It's been said, 'It takes more than a ramp to make church life fully accessible to disabled people'. Paradoxically, we're the losers when we don't 'think beyond the ramp'. We miss unexpected riches and insights that might be shared with us.

You've 'gone beyond the ramp' with me.

Our challenge today, Ability Sunday, is to see whether we can increase doing this for others, with a wide range of disabilities?

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