

Sermon- Matthew 15.10-20, 21-28

I am fond of saying to people at the moment, that each day as we set about the business of trying to work out what we should be doing next in this place, that we stand on shifting sands and the way ahead is far from clear. As an alternative metaphor I would also say that the goal posts are constantly on the move – and thus, it is pretty hard to put the ball in the net if you can't work out where the net has gone. In that world then, I do have some sympathy for those in government who are at this time trying to offer some kind of road map that will navigate us through the Covid 19 crisis. They are trying to keep us healthy and safe but at the same time they are trying not to heap further burning coals upon us in the shape of the consequences of the destruction of the economy and all the knock on effects on health both physical and mental that might have – I in no sense envy them.

Sometimes looking from the outside, some of the decision making that is happening can look a bit chaotic. It is also the case that if you lose yourself in questions of what is, and what is not permissible, in various sectors of society you can end up really very perplexed indeed - but some of this I think simply arises from the fact that the virus is named as novel – and much of what people are having to come up with faces our new situation where the sands shift and the goal posts move almost on a daily basis.

As more is learned about the novel, then it is also the case that we witness 'changes in mind'. Face coverings were for a long time declared unnecessary in the face of our obedient social distancing and frequent hand washing – now they are all but ubiquitous and you can't leave home without one.

In facing new circumstances however, it would be extraordinary if our first best guess were right every time, and I want to call Jesus as my principle witness to that this morning.

Just before I do that I wonder if you think that the idea that Jesus might change his mind is a controversial one. Well if you do, it is probably because you are thinking a little doctrinally and wondering about this person who stands at the centre of our faith who we declare to be both fully God and fully man. And that, if we are on honest, when we seek to apply it, is a pretty hard concept to get your head around. If he has in every sense the attributes of God, then there is a further sense that there is nothing that he cannot know - and thus a mind change in those circumstances would never ever be necessary. But human beings simply do not know everything and if they are in any sense like me – and I'm probably the human I know best - life is often all about trial and error, sin and forgiveness and finding that in some ways we have travelled up a cul- de- sac with our latest thought or action and we need to back track as soon as we can. A human being who knows everything therefore simply cannot be a human being -and thus is we do credit Jesus in all

circumstances with divine knowledge he is God but he does not understand much about what it is to be me or you.

There is though a way of getting ourselves out of this dead end, and it lies in the ancient idea of 'kenosis' or self-emptying. Take yourselves to the famous passage from the second chapter of the epistle to the Philippians and the phrase – 'he emptied himself and took the form of a servant' and take from that that something of the incarnation is about Jesus being human enough and Godly enough to set aside such divine foreknowledge – to almost give himself the opportunity to grow into himself and understand far more about human beings as a result.

So, to the Canaanite woman. The human Jesus standing in his Jewish context – may well at one time from this passage Matthew 15.24 and a similar passage we can find at Matthew 10.5, have thought that his mission was a mission to his own people – God's chosen – the Jews. So wrapped up is he in this idea, that he is nothing short of rude to her at the beginning of this encounter – both rude and blatantly prejudiced. But the Canaanite woman, her humility and obvious faith in him, in a flash of divine insight, changes his mind. Having emptied himself Jesus then grows into himself - and in recognising the woman's faith – a faith found outside the realm of the chosen people - grants her request to have her daughter healed. He changes his mind.

Returning then to our world of shifting stands and migrating goal posts - and those who are trying to navigate us through that – we might be left offering them a little more of a chance before we roundly condemn them. Jesus – the Son of God - was at times human enough not to get things right the first time around – do we demand that they are better than that?

If we do, we might want to hope that we are not called too frequently to judge ourselves or, I fear, we would all too often face our own thorough condemnation. I am pretty sure that this is not what a God, who uniquely in the panoply of world faiths, understands the frailty of what it is to be you and me would want. He would want us to grow out of that - as we grow closer to him – as his Son did before us.