

Sermon for 13th Sunday after Trinity (6th September 2009)

I'm not sure how I missed it. Probably because I was far too wrapped up in my own priorities. I was busy preparing for a wedding before going off to Greenbelt for the weekend. So it wasn't until I started work last Tuesday that I heard about the fatalities at Kennet Place 10 days ago. After the initial shock, I wondered how something like this could happen in this community, and how I could not know about it for 5 days. The thoughts disturbed me, and I don't think I'm alone in that. These tragic deaths have cut through our settled lives and reminded us that we're not immune to the brokenness of our society. That even here, terrible things happen and we're damaged by them and by the reaction they prompt for us to speculation and be drawn in by media sensationalism.

To be honest, I didn't know how to respond. Except I knew I had to do something, first because I'm a Christian and because I'm the parish priest. So I went to visit the neighbours in Kennet Place, to assure them of my prayers and those of the church and offer support. Many were surprised to see me on their doorstep, but pleased too. Later someone said that if they'd been in that position, my visit would have meant all the world to them. That comment, and the fact that 7 neighbours were here on Thursday night to pray with me and others from the church confirmed for me that what I did was right, even though it was uncomfortable.

When we're faced with this tragic event that affects our sense of security and community, and even lead us to question God's goodness, what does God's word have to say to us? Here are three short points from Jesus' strange encounter with a rather forward Syrophenician woman.

First, this is Jesus' first visit to a foreign land. And we know from our own lives that going somewhere strange, whether it's a place or an experience, is often uncomfortable. And we can guess at some of Jesus' discomfort from his response to the woman who bustles up and asks for her daughter to be healed. This is my second observation. Jesus doesn't respond as he does to so many others, like the woman who's been bleeding for 12 years, or Jairus, whose daughter is ill, or the man with a withered hand, or the leper who asks to be made clean. Jesus is on strange territory here, and he appears to be uncertain of what he should do, so he falls back into traditional certainties that salvation is for God's chosen people, the Jews. He even resorts to bigotry, using a coarse but commonly-used insult, referring to the woman and her daughter as dogs. This is not the Jesus we know and love, there's something amiss here. And, third observation, it takes this outspoken outsider to set Jesus straight. She doesn't mince her words, but argues right back at him. What a woman! What an example for women of faith today.

So, 3 things: Jesus goes to a foreign land, he isn't sure what he's doing there, and it takes an outsider to help him see God's way.

What here can help us respond to tragic events in our community? There are two options: we could do nothing and get back to our normal lives, or we could do something and let these events transform us for good. The easy way, or the hard way.

It's a foreign land for most of us to take the hard path of allowing ourselves to be transformed, changed, so that we make a difference in other people's lives. It's not a comfortable place to be to go knocking on the door of strangers to say I'm praying for you, I can tell you that. Well, that was my way to respond. I'm not asking you to do that. But I am asking you to go into your foreign land, to the place that is uncomfortable for you, so that God can begin to do something through you there. It might be inviting your neighbour in for a cup of tea, or baking a cake and taking it round for someone you haven't spoken to yet. Or it might be giving up some time to support a community-building organisation, like the residents association or a uniformed organisation. I don't know what it is for you, but it will be something you're not doing now because it's uncomfortable for you - a foreign land. These little things are what makes a difference, these are what creates community.

When you're in this foreign land, you probably won't be very clear about what you're supposed to do there, and the strangeness might make you want to fall back on old certainties. It's much more comfortable to believe that being a Christian is about duty and going to church on Sundays, not about putting ourselves out to help other people or talking about Jesus. Jesus fell back on certainties too; it's OK to be uncomfortable about what God asks of us, to feel the strangeness of the new land.

But we need to be open to where God wants to take us, and open to God's transformation for our own lives and the situations we find ourselves in. Jesus listened to the Syrophenician woman who tore him off a strip for being too closed and narrow-minded about the good news of God's love. Are we listening to those outside our church community, the outspoken people that give us uncomfortable messages about how the church should respond, what they want Christians to be in this community? Because if we're listening it will mean change for us, and that will be uncomfortable because it will be a strange land.

The easy road or the hard road? Which one for us as a church? Which one for you? Will you get back to your life, or will you change? I end with words from our first reading, and remind you that though they might seem strange, even wrong to some, they echo the words of Jesus in his parable of the great banquet. Here are the words of God to us: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?

Blessings
Gill