**Tenth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 15)**

**Insider / Outsider: encounters with the extraordinary amidst the ordinary**

This morning I want to spend some time exploring with you what happens when the familiar meets the unfamiliar in our lives… what it might mean when the ordinary and the extraordinary come face to face.

A few years ago I had the privilege of conducting a choir for a few days’ singing evensong at Canterbury Cathedral. Growing up in Kent I had been a frequent visitor to the Cathedral since I was a boy, so the opportunity to go behind the scenes was particularly appealing. I was allowed to enter and leave by what felt like secret doors and saw parts of the building I had never seen before. Quite by accident, I hadn’t been through the cathedral nave at all until our last day and, as I was leaving, I chose to walk out that way to say goodbye once again to this familiar friend of a building.

What I encountered in that space stopped me in my tracks. Hanging from that vast medieval ceiling was a mass of clothes… an explosion of fabric that looked like human forms frozen in time. A newspaper review of the art installation from 2017 says this about it:

A baby’s bright red bib emblazoned with the words “My 1st Christmas Ever!” Pyjama tops with sleeve ends intertwined like holding hands. A pair of jeans upside down as though their owner is falling from a height. Shoes, socks, mittens, hats. A long, winding, blue patterned scarf.

These are among 700 items of refugees’ clothing salvaged from beaches and olive groves on the Greek island of Lesbos and hung in an installation by the British war artist Arabella Dorman in the nave of Canterbury Cathedral.

Dorman has called her artwork ‘Suspended’, reflecting both the powerful and poignant display of clothing and the state of limbo experienced by hundreds of thousands of people fleeing conflict and misery.

People were standing, as I was... just gazing upwards in silence. The juxtaposition of the ordered, familiar, comfortable church architecture we all knew with this seemingly jumbled representation of disrupted and broken lives was mesmerising and deeply affecting. It felt like a kind of threshold had been crossed and the contemporary but often hidden horrors of the modern world had broken out into plain sight.

In recent weeks we have heard some well-known passages from Matthew’s gospel: the parable of the wheat and the tares; the mustard seed; Jesus walking on the water and the feeding of the five thousand. These feel to me familiar, comfortable texts and, on the whole, they seem to offer accessible messages about the life of faith.

Today’s reading is perhaps harder to pin down. The Jesus we have met so far in Matthew’s account seeks out the poor and the marginalised, he cures the sick, he feeds the hungry. Perhaps we feel a sense of security in this image of Jesus… it’s familiar; it’s comfortable.

A Canaanite woman shouts: ‘have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon’, and Jesus does nothing. The disciples urge him to send her away… and when Jesus does speak he says that his mission is to the people of Israel only and he refers to the woman’s kind as dogs.

What is going on here? How do we respond to this Jesus with his uncomfortable talk of inclusion and exclusion… with his apparent ambivalence towards the needs of this foreigner?

As is often the case in the gospels, things may not be quite as they seem. I wonder whether Jesus is using this encounter deliberately to teach and challenge the disciples. After all, he has travelled with them across the border to a foreign land, nominally to avoid increasing scrutiny and persecution by the Jewish authorities, but Jesus knows and has prophesied that his mission is far greater in scope than just the people of Israel. He says earlier in Matthew’s gospel (chapter 8):

11I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Jesus will also have been familiar with words from Isaiah 56:

...and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord… these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer...my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

So here she is this stranger... an outsider excluded by law, gender, race, nationality shouting at Jesus and pleading for help. ‘Send her away’, the disciples urge him. ‘You shouldn’t be speaking to her… she’s not one of us.’

Jesus is at first silent, then seems to be agreeing with the disciples, first telling her that he has not been sent to her people and that the food meant for the people of Israel is too good for the dogs of other nations.

Perhaps, though, Jesus is playing on a naivete in his disciples... their sense of safety in the familiar… their taking comfort in inward-looking exclusivity... making them feel even more like they are part of Jesus’ special group…

I wonder whether, while he is saying these things, and letting the disciples believe these things, he is actually looking at the woman… whether there is a tiny gesture... a look in his eyes that says ‘you and I know the truth - they just haven’t got it yet.’

After all, in the previous chapter of Matthew Jesus says to Peter: ‘you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ and here, he says to the foreigner: ‘Woman, great is your faith!’

Today, in this church, the bread will be administered at communion for the first time since lockdown restrictions… something familiar that we might be encountering in a new way. Reflecting on this, it’s worth remembering that two gems from the communion service text are words from the mouths of gentiles - from outsiders:

‘Lord, I am not worthy to receive you’ is adapted from the centurion’s words in Matthew 8: ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant shall be healed…’

...and in the Prayer of Humble Access ‘we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table’ comes from the lips of the Canaanite woman in today’s gospel.

Both of these outsiders, the centurion and the Canaanite woman are shining examples of humility before God. Both have confidence in the abundance of divine grace for all. Jesus accepts all and offers his welcome to all regardless of race, colour, gender, sexuality, or income…

We are granted an opportunity as disciples and as the Church, as we re-encounter familiar things, to look at them with fresh eyes. We are invited as Christians and as the Church to notice.

When I saw those clothes hanging from the vaulted ceiling of Canterbury Cathedral I was struck by the apparent incongruity of that mess amongst the order of the building. In an earlier work called ‘Flight’ Arabella Dorman suspended an upturned inflatable dinghy with three life jackets attached from the ceiling St James, Piccadilly. It was, the artist herself suggested, a horribly inadequate representation of the 3,600 lives that were lost that year as desperate people tried to cross the Mediterranean.

Today… this morning... identical scenes are playing out in the English Channel as families, desperate to escape oppression, strike out for the shores of this country in fear and hope.

The more I learn about the worldwide refugee crisis, about the scale of the racism behind Black Lives Matter, about poverty, homelessness and homophobia the more I am embarrassed by my ignorance and ashamed of my privilege... my familiar and safe ways are being challenged and I’m wondering what I can do.

Jesus accepts the outsider, in fact he seeks them out, he welcomes them in. I wonder if today’s gospel reading is a real challenge to us all to think about what it means to belong… what it means to be included or excluded… about how we encounter people that are ‘other’ to us... can we allow God into those encounters and let them be transformative?

In all this it’s vital to remember that once we were all outsiders. We came to this faith and by God’s grace we were welcomed in. We come to this table and Jesus welcomes us in. Our calling as God’s disciples is as broad as God’s mercy for his creation, but how on earth do we take on this responsibility?

Perhaps we could try to do something small but extraordinary this week… something that messes a little with our sense of what’s familiar and comfortable… something truthful… something that lets God transform us. We might allow the oppression of the excluded to affect us… to upset us… we might learn more about it…. we might pray about it… talk to each other and to God about it.

The Canaanite woman shouts to Jesus asking for help and she gets so much more than she wanted. Indeed, some of the greatest answers to prayer have a life-changing effect. My prayer this morning for us all is that God will open our eyes to notice who is an insider and who an outsider… to notice the extraordinary amongst the ordinary... that God will give us humble hearts and quiet confidence to seek out encounters that transform our lives and the lives of others… that, in the words of today’s collect, he will ‘open our hearts to the riches of his grace’ that we might share that grace freely with others and that God’s house might be a house of prayer for all peoples.

Amen