

Proper 15, Pent 12

Isaiah 56:1,6-8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

Good morning, my name is Rachel and I'm a seminarian from Cambridge in the UK.

I've had the privilege of being at HTP for the past 3 weeks and when my friends and family back home have asked how things are going, I've said two things. Firstly, everyone is very friendly and secondly people at HTP know how to have fun! So, thank you very much for your warm welcome and for your hospitality during my stay.

I now have the further privilege of preaching this morning and sharing some of my thoughts and reflections with you.

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In the readings this morning, we see a vision of God's salvation. A vision that is wide, expanding and challenges us to check our assumptions about people and ask the question, what is a faithful response when God is at work in ways that we don't expect?

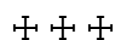
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Isaiah 56 is addressed to the remnant of Israel, to these 'outcasts' who have been exiled and displaced, their city and Temple destroyed. Yet the scripture also mentions the 'foreigners who join themselves to the Lord', who love the Lord's name. The vision of salvation in Isaiah includes both the people of Israel and those outside.

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In Matthew's Gospel, we see this tension playing out. The woman in the story is a 'Canaanite', a non-Jew, and strikes me here that she is like one of the 'foreigners' in Isaiah who 'join themselves to the Lord'. She does not convert to Judaism and rather keeps her Canaanite identity. The woman has clearly heard of Jesus, addressing him as 'Lord' and 'Son of David'. She recognises God at work.

Jesus' reaction might shock us. He firstly ignores her, then states that his mission is 'to the lost sheep of Israel', rather than to non-Jewish people and then -- he insults her. In Matthew's Gospel, we see Jesus' ministry presented as the calling of the people of Israel, in order that they might become a blessing to the rest of the world. Jesus' response is uncomfortable for us, and it is an unfamiliar concept that he might act this way *just* because she isn't Jewish. And yet despite the rejection levelled against her, this woman persists. She kneels and, in language reminiscent of many of the psalms, she addresses Jesus as 'Lord', asks for help again. Jesus finally relents. He acknowledges the woman's faith and allows himself to be moved by it and then gives this wonderful remark, 'Let it be done for you as you wish' as the woman's daughter is healed instantly.

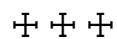


In a book called the Widening Circle, Bishop Graham Tomlin describes how God blesses the world by choosing a part to bless the whole. Israel, as a priestly nation, is to be a blessing to the world and the church becomes God's means of blessing the rest of humanity.

The circle of blessing gets wider and wider, and God's salvation reaches out beyond these first century binaries of Jew and Gentile and meets us in the here and now.

As humans we often find our security in groups. We tend to gate-keep, to draw distinctions and to fear the other. So what is a faithful response when God is at work in ways that we don't expect? It is to dig our heels in? To become entrenched? To become fearful?

I wonder if there is another approach?



Rev Dr Sam Wells often talks about improvisation. He writes that improvisation in theatre is a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear. It is not about being clever or witty, rather when improvising, actors learn to be obvious, to trust in their learned habit and to enjoy one another.¹

Part of the practice of improvisation is 'over-accepting'. This means when an actor is made an offer, they accept the premise but place the offer on a much larger canvas than has been imagined by the person making the offer.

The woman asks Jesus for crumbs from the table. Not only does Jesus accept the premise but he goes beyond acceptance. He places her offer on a much larger canvas than she can imagine, by acknowledging the Canaanite woman's faith and healing her daughter. She receives far more than the crumbs that fall from the table.

¹ Faith in a Secular Age: Reimagining Christian Ethics. A Lecture given in Utrecht, Holland, on October 16, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells.

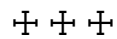
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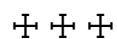
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The Church is the body of Christ in the world and the hands with which God blesses the rest of humanity. As the circle gets wider, it brings freshness and a new perspective, but it also presents challenges as we learn to respond to faith in unexpected people and places.

Improvisation is a ‘yes and’ approach. It allows us to trust in the habits and practices of our shared life while maintaining an open posture to the new things that God is always doing and to faithfully encounter the unknown. We need to be improvisers.



I visited the Episcopal cathedral in Atlanta this week and on a sign near the entrance, I noticed a verse from Isaiah 56, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’. And it made me wonder how often is this true for the Church?

I usually avoid talking about controversial topics. Perhaps it’s a British thing.

Yet in the Church of England right now, I think that there is a deep need for faithful improvisation. We are discussing LGBTQ+ inclusion and it has been a painful journey for many – for queer Christians, for allies and for those on either side of the debate. It feels like what is being offered to the LGBTQ+ community are crumbs from the table. We seem to have a scarcity mindset, which does not uphold the expansive vision of salvation seen in Isaiah. Mercy is narrow, not wide, and we are not open to the ways in which God might surprise us.

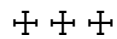
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What is a faithful response when God is at work in ways that we don't expect? Can we faithfully improvise being both rooted in our shared life and open to the unknown?

And when we encounter real faith, do we have the courage to give more than crumbs from the table? Because there is another table. A table around which we gather here on earth, foreshadowing the heavenly banquet, where all are welcome and there is more than enough to go around. And as we share in this Eucharistic feast, we become one body, beautifully diverse in its all difference.

Amen