

Proper 18 Year B

Psalms 125

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

Those of you who were at the joint service at the Rock at the end of July may remember that in his sermon Darren McCallig suggested that the reason Jesus was crucified was because of the way he ate. He gave as an example of this the feeding of the thousands on the hillside. For those, like me, who were not there at the Rock that day, here are a few ways in which the way Jesus ate would likely have offended the religious conservatives of the day. He paid no heed to the need in the Levitical laws for hand-washing. I doubt that washing facilities were available on the hillside across the lake—that is, on non-Jewish land. He shared the food with the crowd on this non-Jewish side of the lake, so clearly paid no heed to where and with whom he ate. He was almost certainly sharing with Gentiles. We know from other passages too that Jesus ate with the despised tax collectors and sinners. The word companion means with (com) bread (French: pain), that is eating together, and Jesus was not one to be cautious.

In Biblical times, even everyday mealtimes were ritual events where the social order and rules of the tribe were reinforced. Anyone who challenged these rankings and boundaries would be regarded as a real threat to social stability. Did any of you see the programmes about the Amish in the US? People who live simply, many of them in Pennsylvania, according to a strict interpretation of a particular translation of the Bible and to rules laid down centuries ago. They are self-sufficient, no electricity, disciplined life, social order tightly ordered and maintained. It looks quite attractive at first. To be free from the pressures of the consumer, capitalist society. In many ways it looks like an idyllic life. Until—that is—someone wants to marry outside the tribe—a mixed marriage you might say—or someone wants to join another Christian group. Then those people are shunned, excommunicated, ignored, sent away. Cast out. As far as the main group is concerned, those explorers are effectively killed. It all sounds rather familiar. Something similar was going on in the dynamics between the religious orthodox 2000 years ago and Jesus, who was exploring and pushing at boundaries. Has anything changed?

Now, look at today's Gospel reading. There is an exchange between Jesus and the gentile woman which must be read tongue in cheek. Jesus teases the woman, likening her to a dog. If he said that today, he would be in court on a charge of abuse. The woman was no push-over. She answered back and stood up for herself, and Jesus ministered to her as she asked. He then went on to do more of his work in the decapolis – a group of ten towns in what we now call Jordan – most definitely not amongst the chosen people. Again, pushing at boundaries, and ignoring the conventions of the day. In today's epistle, James is pushing out the same message in a different way. Stop fawning, he says, over the powerful, the influential, the well-dressed, and start ministering to your neighbour as yourself, no matter how they speak, or smell, or appear.

There are lots of resonances in all this for us today. Look at the extent to which we look askance at people who challenge conventions and expectations. People who do not dress as we think they should. People who do not speak as we think they should. Rectors who do not behave in ways that people think they should. People who do not marry those that their relations approve of. Members of the Church of Ireland in this state have known what it is like to be a minority that feels it must keep its nose clean, though it is worth pointing out that this state would not be a state were it not for the lives of members of the Church of Ireland like Wolfe Tone, CS Parnell, Erskine Childers to name but three. Now, as the Church of Ireland opens its doors and celebrates itself, we must be careful that we don't start excluding others. We must guard against becoming simply a club for our friends and relations.

You sometimes hear people say that we should watch what we say and do, and be circumspect. And so we should be careful of what comes out of our mouths and what we do with our bodies. But too much circumspection leads to over-cautiousness and too much of that leads to stifling of initiative and death. We must take risks and try new things if we are to survive. We must be imaginative. Organisms grow and evolve as a result of taking risks. Something new develops and either is useful and grows, or is not useful and withers away. (Though quite why we still have toenails is a mystery.) An amoeba moves to a new environment by sticking a bit of itself out to test the water, the rest following. Children learn by stepping out into the unknown. So do we. That's why the current trend for over-protective parenting is utterly and completely mistaken. Mothering becomes smothering.

Jesus was always taking risks. So must we. As churches it is good that we are thinking of ways both to invite others in, and to go out to others. We see in the Gospel that Jesus excludes no-one. Neither must we. Neither do we. We won't turn our nose up at someone because they don't look or smell or act according to our expectations. We open the doors to all. *There's a wideness in God's mercy* that will not

be limited by human convention. I guess that if we erect a barrier between ourselves and anyone else, we will find that Jesus is on the other side of it.