

Newington Methodist Church

Church Lane, Newington, Sittingbourne, ME9 7JT

News and views for the week commencing 16 August

The church building at Newington remains closed but as a congregation we remain united through prayer.



If you have any concerns or prayer requests, please do not hesitate to contact Rev Robert Zachar or your pastoral visitor.

Notices

- **Sunday service at 10:30am** – will be led by Rev Tony Graff and can be found on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/SqAQgkZbyhs> ... or join by telephone: 020 3481 5237 (charged at the standard national rate); when requested enter meeting ID 742 958 8134 followed by #; press # again when asked for a participant ID
- You're also invited to join in the **Newington social catch-up before the service at 9am** online using Zoom at: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/4628098433> (or use meeting ID 462 809 8433) ... or join by telephone: 020 3481 5237 (charged at the standard national rate); when requested enter meeting ID 462 809 8433 followed by #; press # again when asked for a participant ID
- **Next Sunday's service**, on 23 August, will be led by Rev Robert Zachar. Looking further ahead, Sunday 6 September will be a special welcome service for our new part-time ministers Rev Gill le Boutillier-Scott (Hextable) and Rev Paul Lau (Medway Chinese church). Rev Helen Hollands (Circuit Assistant Chair) will give the sermon.
- **When are we opening our church?** The Church Council will meet on **17 August at 2pm** using Zoom to discuss and approve a risk assessment and date(s) for the reopening of the building and resumption of Sunday worship on site. A copy of the risk assessment has been circulated again with these notices. Join using Zoom at: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87593937565?pwd=RDdJZjRFRMXpuNSt5elphRTRpL1E2dz09> (meeting ID 875 9393 7565, passcode 856 622)
- **Bring your chair and Bible** every Sunday from 3 to 3:30pm in the front garden at Sittingbourne Methodist Church. Rev Robert Zachar is leading on 16 August.
- Christian Aid is seeking donations for its **Lebanon Crisis Appeal** for the more than 750,000 people who have been affected by the explosion in Beirut on 4 August, which destroyed homes, hospitals and grain stores. You can give online at: <https://donate.christianaid.org.uk/Donate/Step/1?ApproachCode=A036027>

Reflection

This week, Martin Smith (who was planned to lead our worship this Sunday) provides a reflection on the set Gospel reading for this week, Matthew 15: 21-28.

The Syrophenician Woman

In this story we encounter the prickly theme of “chosen-ness.” Does God have favourites? Is there really a chosen nation, a chosen people? If God is the Creator of us all, how can this be? Not easy questions to confront or to answer. Not when we now know what terrible acts have been perpetrated by those who believe that God is on their side – and that includes both Christians and non-Christians.

Jesus is being accosted by a woman, not with a polite request, but with shouting.

She was a Syrophenician or Canaanite woman. What comes through in this exchange is the rather uncomfortable way Jesus seems to treat this woman. She comes crying to him for help and at first he ignores her and turns his back on her. His disciples take a cue from his reaction and beg him to get rid of her for she would not let up. So here he is in a Gentile city with a screaming Gentile woman and knows that if he heals her daughter there will be hoards more people flocking to him from this district. Now much has been written about whether Jesus makes a racist, sexist, or just a plain irritated comment or all three. But whichever it is it does not fit comfortably with our image of Jesus. The reference to dogs is unusual, but the Phoenicians were one of the first people in the western world to keep dogs as pets, rather than as hunters or scavengers. The word is doggie which and not the insulting word ‘dog’ as a Jew would use it. Is Jesus using a homely illustration of the pet dog yapping for food, while the food is set on the table in front of the child?

There are many characteristics of this woman that fill me with admiration: She must have heard about Jesus even before he entered her city because she is ready. What she heard about him, she believed. She is not a Jew, yet she is using language that is familiar only to Jews of the time. She calls him “Son of David.” She is absolutely certain that Jesus is who he says he is. Unlike his own people, who doubt him and try to trip him at every conversation, she takes it as a given that he alone has the power to heal her little daughter. And because she loves her daughter she will beg, ask and shout until his power gives her what she wants: the healing of her child.

In her pleading, her shouting, she asks first for mercy and then for healing. Apparently Jesus keeps on walking, but she follows. She does not give up. Jesus, however, is silent. Even his disciples, embarrassed at her shouts, ask him to respond, to send her away. They, too, are certain that because she is not a Jew she doesn’t have the right to ask him for anything.

Now Jesus says something not to her or to them: It is obvious that he is examining a question in his own mind:

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This is his mission as he has known it up to this moment. And he has worked at it every moment of his days – to bring his people back to God.

The woman hears his words, but she is the kind who is not deterred by national and religious differences. She will not let them keep her from seeking help. Now Jesus uses

language that separates those who think they are God's chosen from those whom they consider outside God's grace. The Israelites are the children, and the outsiders are the dogs. In our age and our culture this is heavy language. We do not exactly know what it meant at that time and in that context, but we know it was not complimentary. The bread is the essence of life. It must be given to the children.

The mother, however, does not budge. "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table." This poor outsider understands that God's mercy is so great that even the tiny bit that escapes from the chosen ones is enough for healing and for doing good.

This is what faith means. She knows who he is and she knows that only Jesus can heal her daughter. The rest does not matter: She is a suppliant. She is not proud; she is determined.

And Jesus responds to this faith instantly. In those few minutes, he recognizes that his mission has expanded. A poor woman has shown him this much: He did not come just for the children of Israel. His mercy extends to **everyone**. Full of admiration, he responds first to her great faith, and then to her wish for her daughter: "Your faith is great. Your daughter is well."

An outcast becomes a catalyst. This is the wonder of the gospel stories. The Good News comes from unexpected places. A woman ignored and considered a nuisance becomes an object of admiration by Jesus himself. Instead of sending her away, he expands his mission from the limits of Judaea to the rest of the world. The encounter does not happen within the land of the chosen but outside it, in the pagan realm of Tyre and Sidon. Once again, God brings good out of what has seemed evil. The dogs enter the same realm as the children. They now eat from the table and not just of the crumbs that fall from it. We all owe this woman a great deal.

The Incarnation is vivid in this story, Jesus learns to become more receptive to God's will. He learns something from a humble woman and from a mother's love. This is a story to be proclaimed and to fill us with gratitude.

"Lord have mercy on me," the woman cries. And the Lord shows mercy to one considered an outcast.

God's mercy covers all of us, each and every one.

- People who are prepared to contradict and argue face to face, people who will quietly get on with things
- Outsiders
- Undesirables, people who are not "one of us"
- People who drink alcohol, people who do not
- People who go to the shops on Sunday, people who will not
- People who like worship songs, people who like traditional hymns, people who prefer silence

- People who want churches open as soon as possible/, people who do not think it's safe yet

All of us, not some of us, all accepted by Jesus. The Lord's mercy is for us all, each and every one.

Martin

People and places for prayer

- Beryl and Peter, Margaret N, Peter and Ian, Heather and Stephen, Elena
- Our Church Council and the decisions we will take; for other churches considering how and when to reopen; and for Gill and Paul as they prepare to join the Circuit
- All those shielding from Covid-19, people in places facing renewed lockdown measures and all those who are suffering from the virus and the medical staff who care for them
- The people of Beirut and all those who are in mourning, those who have lost their homes and livelihoods, those who are suffering through a lack of food and medical supplies
- We remember our friends who have died and their loved ones: Audrey, Margaret S.

Puzzlers

All the words are from this week's Gospel reading, and the leftovers spell out another!

R	J	E	S	U	S	P	L	A	C	E	Cried	Left
D	A	U	G	H	T	E	R	E	C	P	Daughter	Lost
N	N	T	E	E	F	S	E	U	R	T	Dogs	Noise
E	O	E	Y	T	L	A	G	L	I	A	Even	Place
V	P	D	S	R	L	I	I	O	E	E	Faith	Region
E	N	O	I	S	E	E	O	T	D	R	Feet	Send
P	L	E	H	S	F	V	N	D	H	G	Fell	Sheep
											Great	Sidon
											Help	True
											Jesus	Tyre
												Very
											The leftovers spell...	

Answer to last week's puzzler: *The three parables scrambled together were: Prodigal Son; Sower; Good Samaritan. Please send news, prayer requests and any other contributions for inclusion in the weekly newsletter to robert.zachar@gmail.com*