# Morningside Sermon 10.30am 6/9/15

# Will you help?

# *Psalm 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Mark 7:24-37*

On social media on Wednesday night, and in newspapers and news bulletins across the country by Thursday, a photograph was posted. One of many. A soldier stands on a beach q5 Bodrum, a coastal town in Turkey. He’s standing on the sand, with his back to the photographer. He’s writing something down in a notebook. On the shoreline, washed in by the sea is the drowned body of a young, very young boy. As the story unfolds we learn that the boy was three years old. From a Syrian refugee family.

I looked at the photograph – and no doubt many of you have done the same – and wondered – “In whose arms was that little boy held? From whose arms did that little boy slip as the boat he was on sank?” Three years old. All his little life he had probably known nothing other than war, food and water shortages. Perhaps all his life had been spent in a refugee camp, surrounded by his homeless family, driven out by the forgotten war in Syria, where millions have already been displaced. What dreams and hopes were there for that little child? Perhaps he and his family were already on the outskirts, already outcasts, already untouchables because of their religion, or politics, or social background. As the days go by the story goes from a washed-up body on a far away beach, to a child with a name, a family, a difficult background in a war-blighted part of the world.

The refugee crisis is complicated and strong emotional reactions to what we are seeing are natural. We want to help. We are outraged at the slowness of the response of politicians, and unsure about what we could or should do ourselves. In an age when the one-off charity giving to a particular cause is the norm, and I don’t deride that for a moment, that kind of quick-fix response will not do in this present crisis. Nor indeed in many others.

Out of Africa, into Malta – a Guild Project, works to provide Church of Scotland support to our Church on that island who work with refugees who land there from Africa. Christian Aid calls us to focus on the need, not the numbers. The Edinburgh Direct Aid office in Granton is collecting clothing and school things and toiletries. If you are looking for something practical to do these things will make a difference – these are but some of the places where your help does good.

But this is not simply about passing on money, or donating foodstuffs and clothes. Nor is it simply about responding to the refugee crisis, vital though that is. The other needs in the world have not gone away and are not diminished. The needs of the charities supported by this Church, and the other charities and organisation that I know many of you support, still continue and need your help.

Tragedies come with challenges, and are uncomfortably telling in ways that stretch our imagination and compassion and self-awareness. It even happened to Jesus – as we heard in our reading this morning. The irony for us is that the nationality of the woman who challenged Jesus was – Syrian.

The Syrophonecian woman Jesus met in an area called the Decapolis – outside traditional Jewish territory (in others Mark is underlining that this woman was an outsider amongst outsiders) had everything going against here when she pushed her way into Jesus’ presence. She was a woman; she was a Gentile; she lived on the wrong side of the tracks. She had not right to engage Jesus in conversation or expect His help.

“Despite the diktats of custom, this woman does approach Jesus. She is driven by something more powerful than protocol; she is desperately afraid for her daughter’s life. She bows before Jesus and (begs for help). We expect our kind, loving Jesus to say, “Of course I will save your daughter,” but here Jesus is caught with His proverbial compassion down. Instead He rejects her with what sounds like a racial slur. He calls her a dog. We wince at the exchange, but it would have been nothing new or unexpected in the time of Jesus, with centuries of bad blood between the people of Israel and its neighbours. Still, it is harsh.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Many who have suffered those words might have crept away, feeling small and insignificant, but not this Syrian woman. She boldly responds, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Jesus’ earlier prejudice, for such it was, was very human. The insight that follows the woman’s bold response is divine. He cuts through the prejudice, and He helps. His mission of hope is no longer restricted to people of His own kind. In this brutal, perhaps even a little tongue in cheek humourous exchange, the ministry of Jesus expands beyond the Jews to the whole world. Not just to Jews but to Gentiles. Not just to Europeans but to Syrians, Afghans, Somalis, Libyans, Kurds. Not just to people like us but to all people.

Each one of us will, to a greater or lesser extent, have prejudices. We will divide and separate into people like us and people not like us. Scotland versus England. Edinburgh versus Glasgow. ‘Which school did you go to’ is still a subtly pigeon-holing Edinburgh question. Do you live on the right or wrong side of Comiston Road? We divide and separate. It makes things more manageable. Perhaps it even make things seem more reasonable and realistic. We can’t help everyone all of the time. Our benefits system in a time of austerity is being cut and stretched because there is a need to balance the books and live within our means. It’s hard enough to look after even our own people.

And then the body of a three year old boy is washed up on a Turkish beach. We learn his name is Alan, and he is Kurdish. That his family had lived in Damascus, but when violence escalated they had moved to a village outside the northern town of Kobane. That his mother and brother are also likely to be dead. That his father survived. That being Kurds, in Syria, they had no citizenship rights and were effectively stateless.

Do we give support and help and welcome to ‘dogs’ like that? When they come crawling under the table, looking even for the crumbs of our society, where we throw so much away, and jealously guard our ‘rights’ to hold on to what we have and keep more for ourselves than we are willing to share?

Yes, it’s time to feed the ‘dogs’, or do we call them migrants, or are they refugees? They are, in fact, brothers and sisters in the human family. We might not be able to help all of them, but we will be able to help some of them. And some will be part of the human refugee crisis that has captured our headlines. And some will be supported by Scottish Love in Action in India, or the Edinburgh Clothing Store, or the Bethany homeless trust. And some will be an isolated frail neighbour along the road; or a member of the congregation we’ve not seen for a while and we’ve just realised; or a young mother struggling to cope with ‘baby blues’; or a student away from home for the first time and living nearby; or a beggar on the street being human trafficked by a gang; or a woman in tears on the bus; or an old man missing his wife; or an exhausted partner who has worked silly hours all week to keep money coming in; or someone sitting beside you right now in the pew, whose name you don’t know, who might only need from you a friendly smile and a ‘hello’.

The story of Jesus being brought up short by a Syrian woman, and being challenged to reimagine the scope and scale of His ministry, not just to people He was comfortable with, but to those He was not, is also our story. It challenges us to respond, somehow, to one of the greatest of all human questions. “Will you help?”

Will you? Can you? How? On a day of covenant promises we are reminded of who we are as Christians, and what we are called to attempt in the Name of Jesus – Who was also challenged by that same question. He did help. So must we.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

**Amen**

1. Amy C Howe, Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 4 p44-48 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)