

Jesus Love Reaches All People - help us not to stand in the way.

20 August 2017

Reading: Matthew 15:21-28

Today it's wonderful to welcome Amalie into the family of God through baptism.

Daughters are really fun. When my girls were young they were obsessed with painting my nails.

"I don't want everyone thinking I'm strange," I said. "Why not paint my toenails and then it can be just our secret."

So they did.

"It's clear polish," they said. "No one will see it."

What they didn't tell me was that it was glow in the dark nail polish.

You guessed it. That night was Holy Thursday. It was foot washing night. And who but the vicar had glow in the dark nail polish!

We all want the best for our kids. And today's Gospel is no exception.

A woman whose daughter is ill is desperate to get Jesus to help her.

Coming at this story with modern eyes it would be easy to miss. that Jesus is in a foreign territory, the locals are hostile to him and the disciples are on the defensive. Jews didn't talk to non Jews, men didn't talk to woman in public and little girls didn't matter.

The woman in today's story wasn't a Jew and she would have known that Jews didn't like mixing with non Jews. But she took a risk for her daughter and begged Jesus to help heal the daughter. The disciples try and get her to be quiet and to go away.

At first even Jesus didn't answer her, but she kept asking, risking being embarrassed, verbally abused or worse because of her faith that Jesus could help.

Finally Jesus told her that 'It isn't right to take food away from children and feed it to dogs.' Jewish people sometimes referred to non Jews as dogs as a kind of insult.

Yet even after this, the woman still persisted and replied that even dogs get the crumbs the fall from the table.

Then Jesus did what we have come to expect of him. He opened his heart, and he healed the little girl.

Although we today may not see this as remarkable, it would have been a big deal to the disciples because Jesus is showing that there are no limits to his love. Not race nor gender nor age, are barriers to Jesus love.

I want to go further. I think that without the message of inclusion in today's Gospel, today's baptism would not be taking place at all.

When we look back at the stories and at the people of that age we feel so much more enlightened. After all we don't let such things get in the way, we don't exclude people or do we?

When Justin Duckworth was elected Bishop of Wellington, the news got out that he was planning not to wear shoes. He came from a community that had dedicated itself to the needs of the poor. The core values of the urban vision movement that Justin and his wife Jenny started 27 years ago, are, having Jesus as their centre, belonging deeply together and giving their best for the least. As a part of this commitment to the poorest, Justin doesn't wear shoes. In the run up to his ordination, it was this that the media and many people inside and outside the church seized on. "We can't have a bishop who doesn't wear shoes." "Doesn't he have any respect?" "Imagine going to church and seeing his bare feet." Justin, to his credit, and with the support of the other bishops didn't compromise and he is going about the diocese shoeless. In fact, it's very biblical not to wear shoes: God told Moses,
"Remove your shoes, you are on holy ground."

I was once asked to take a wedding. The couple were poor and couldn't afford new shoes. They were very embarrassed about it. Everyone will see that we don't have any money they said. From somewhere, an idea came to me. "Don't worry about your shoes, let's not wear any." To make it easier for them I offered to wear bare feet too. At the end of the day what was important was the love and commitment of this couple who wanted to spend their lives together not whether they had shoes. But I did carefully cut my toenails that day!

A friend of mine at theological college from a Samoan background started wearing bare feet to celebrate services. He was told by parishioners "You must learn to wear shoes, or you can't be ordained. And so he wasn't ordained.

My point here isn't that we shouldn't wear shoes. My point is that sometimes we are guilty of replacing discipleship - really following Jesus and his love - with middleclassness and all its petty rules and expectations.

Jesus reached out. He went beyond his own people. He went beyond his own territory. He went way beyond what was expected of him. And, because of that, we can baptise with confidence today because we know there is no limit to the embracing love of Christ. We are all gathered up in the arms of Christ's love.

Most people when choosing a doctor do it on the basis of how good a doctor they are. I have a different criteria. Mine is how good their magazines are. I need to know that, when waiting, I won't be wasting my time reading about Prince Harry's love life. My doctor had Autocar, The Economist and Wilderness NZ. He also had a poster, which sums up our task for Ar Ma Lee today.

It had photo of a baby and the words read:

How a child learns

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with fear, they learn to be anxious.

But If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.

If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.

If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.

I think that is what we promise to be and do for Amalie today. And as we do so something strange happens. We learn for ourselves that we too are loved by God in a way that goes beyond any petty rules we might put in His way. And that is really, really good news. In fact, it's the best news ever.