

Reading: Mark 7:24-37

One of the hard things about lockdown and life in general is the pace of change. Who would have thought 18 months ago that we would be locking down and that I would be talking to you via YouTube? Up until recently I thought YouTube was something on the back of the toilet bowl. If you are finding the pace of change hard, spare a thought for Ron Hermanns. Ron died this week: New Zealand's oldest man at 109. He was born in 1911. That was before the Titanic did its thing, before we had phones, electricity, radio, flight, and the list goes on. Despite all the change or maybe because of it, "he spent his life problem solving and thinking of new ways of doing things."

Jesus is confronted in our passage with change and a new way of doing things. He is trying to have a break and is hoping that no one recognises him. He is up in the north of Galilee far from home. It is there that a persistent woman falls at his feet begging him to heal her daughter. It's hard to think of a more inappropriate request.

Firstly, she is a woman. Men and especially Jewish rabbis were not to talk to women in public. Her daughter has an unclean spirit, meaning she is unclean too. She should be at home in isolation not talking to random men. Finally, she is a Gentile and not one of God's chosen people ... or is she? Other rabbis would have run from her in horror. But not Jesus, he begins a conversation with her. She is clever and plays to his fundamental belief in God's love. "Even children," she says, "need crumbs to eat." There and then, Jesus is challenged to change, he is challenged to see that the reign of God is not just for the Jews. He is called to change and embrace all with love. And he does! He heals her daughter.

For the early Christian community that Mark was writing his Gospel to, the biggest question was this - is the love we see in Jesus just for the Jews or all is it for all people? We need to thank God for this woman and her persistence because without her we may never have heard of Jesus.

We see Jesus coping with change and embracing his newfound mission, but what of us?

Change isn't always something that we want to embrace. I heard of one parish, (not ours - we have wonderful wardens) where the Vicar's Warden retired after 45 years. "You must have seen a lot of change over those years," she was asked. "Yes" she replied proudly "and I have opposed every one of them."

On Fathers' Day we might speculate "How many fathers does it take to change a light?" Answer: "Who cares as long as you get a trip to Mitre 10 out of it."

To be sure not all change is good. So how can we as Christians assess change? What is the measure that we can use to evaluate change?

The Gospel gives us the answer we need. Does the change widen the circle of God's love? Does the change mean that we are able to share with more people and different people the love that God has for them?

This last week I was asked to help a person at Waikato University with her research. I was asked to name two success stories from the parish and two times that our vision has been enlarged. So I told them about Petersgate and the preschool.

But I could just have easily told her about "Keeping Good Company," or the "Rest home ministry", or the "ESOL class" or "Mainly Music" or the "A Team" or "Coffee and Chat" or "the Fever concerts" or... the list goes on. This has always been a place that is ready to try new things. Even what we are doing right now - recording across the internet while I talk to myself. A whole new frontier of ministry.

Widening the circle of God's love is what we are all about.

(I was very touched recently by a Muslim family at the preschool whose little one went off to school. Mum asked, "Can I still visit the preschool as I have made such good friends here?")

Does Petersgate widen the circle of God's love by engaging with new people? You bet. Does the preschool widen the circle of God's love by engaging with new people? You bet. Does the ESOL class, Mainly Music, Keeping Good Company, the Fever concerts widen the circle of God's love? You bet.

Lockdown gives us a golden opportunity to widen our circle of inclusion just as other times of crisis have.

In WW1 three good friends were in the trenches. Unfortunately, one of the friends was killed. Determined to give him a good burial they took his body to the local village priest. "Sorry," he said, "This cemetery is only for Roman Catholics, your friend was an Anglican, bury him outside the cemetery wall." So, with some bitterness the friends set to and buried him outside the wall.

Eventually the war stopped and, on the way home they resolved to visit his grave. But try as they might, they couldn't find it. So, they went to the priest. "Where is our friend?" they asked in desperation. "I was so moved by your plight" he said "that I moved the wall. I moved the wall."

So, we are left with a question. How is God challenging you to widen the circle of your love this coming week?