

September 8, 2024 (Trinity 15) – Revd Wim Kuiper
Anglican Church Arnhem & Nijmegen

Readings: Prov 22.1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Ps 125; James 1.1-10, 14-17; Mark 7.24-end

At my Licensing, I have again promised to use only the forms of service which are authorised or allowed by Canon. And I am really happy to do so. Because these forms, many of which can be found in these so called red booklets, are the expression of our theology, they are very well thought through and beautifully crafted. It is the collective wisdom of our Anglican, Church of England church, the church that only became my church after a long journey, now just some 17 years ago. Many of us are used to say these same words Sunday after Sunday. And the great advantage of this is that these words may thereby sink deeper into our minds and hearts, feeding us in ways that are often not conscious to us. Words that may resurface whenever we need to hear them. At the same time, it is also good every now and then, to try to read them in a more conscious way, looking for new ways in which they may speak to us, in the situation we find ourselves in today.

Many of the words in our liturgy are directly linked to Bible passages. And in the liturgy of the Sacrament, that we use around Holy Communion, there are two sentences based on words that two persons use in their encounters with Jesus. The two of them have in common that they are non-Jews, gentiles, foreigners. This makes these encounters, the words that are spoken and the way Jesus reacts to them, quite special and very meaningful. These two show a commendable boldness and courage to turn to this Jewish rabbi with their search for healing, not for themselves but for two of their loved ones. At the same time, they also show a virtue that is highly regarded by the Gospel writers and in our religion in general: they show a lot of humility. The two characters I am talking about are the Roman Centurion whose servant is healed by Jesus, and the Syrophenician woman from today's Gospel passage whose daughter is also healed by him. Two healings from a distance which makes them even more special in the eyes of their witnesses. In both cases, Jesus is impressed by their attitude towards him, by their faith especially because they are foreigners, and he shows his compassion. Albeit in the case of the Syrophenician woman seemingly somewhat reluctant. There has been a lot of theological speculation around that and about the way he expresses this reluctance. But I will leave that aside today, unless you want to bring it up over coffee after the service.

So, let's take a look at those two citations in our liturgy. The first one can be found on page 14. We say it together many times, at least when I am officiating, because I normally tend to choose the option that contains it: 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed.' Now the second part of this sentence is a bit of a change of what was actually said by the centurion in Matthew 8 verse 8. Because as I already mentioned he is not asking for his own healing. But the sentiment of the first half is a beautiful expression of his humility. Unexpected of someone who is a military commander, representing the force of the Roman occupation. It is this humility that makes the Centurion an example to follow, and so we use these same words of his, some 2000 years later. On the next page (15), in both prayers right before the distribution, we find an allusion to the words of the Syrophenician woman, made even a bit more humble here: "We were not fit even to eat the crumbs from under your table." But despite the fact that 'our hands were unclean and our hearts unprepared', we pray: 'Most merciful Lord, your love compels us to come in.' For me this a beautiful and moving expression of what we believe when we come to the Lord's table.

All of these words are linked to that virtue of humility that does not fit very well in our present day culture. And around which we also may feel a bit uncomfortable, for some valid reasons as well. We human beings are so much used to think of ourselves and others in terms of a hierarchy of higher and lower. Comparing and classifying ourselves and others on whatever kind of scales. And also making

distinctions between being one of us, or one of them. And those who are regarded by many as being somehow lower, or as being different than the majority of the others, have often been told to regard themselves as lowly as well, to be and stay humble for that reason. So this virtue has also been often misused and misinterpreted, even within churches. Think for instance of the way in which women have been treated as unequal to men, or children as of lesser value than adults. The poor standing at the back, while the rich took the prime seats. And the list goes on and on. Some of us may have also suffered from religious traditions that tell people that they are just full of sinfulness and not able to do any good. So it is only natural that we have become cautious when it comes to this virtue of humility. But our humility does not mean at all that we should feel ourselves to be of a lesser value than our fellow human beings. It is rather about feeling ourselves small and indeed also of being aware of our shortcomings in our encounters with almighty God. Being aware of how grateful we should be for his often seemingly undeserved loving mercy, his amazing grace. It is this kind of humbleness that makes us look at ourselves in the same way as we can look at our fellow human beings. Not only as all of us being of equal value, but also of equally in need of God's forgiveness, our Lord's healing touch upon us, and the guidance of his Spirit to keep us on the right track.

This leads us also automatically away from feeling ourselves so much better than the others, from unhealthy feelings of pride and what in a nice old fashioned way is called vain-glory. Again, a message that does not sit well in our culture that gives such an elevated status to the rich and famous. But on the other hand, the centurion and the Syrophenician woman show us that humbleness can be very well combined with being bold and courageous, by ignoring manmade divisions between people and showing a lack of concerns about social status issues. Like them, we should not think too small of ourselves, nor too big. It is about keeping the right balance between the two unhelpful extremes. A healthy via media, or middle way, which by the way fits so well to the Anglican tradition. Let's hope that the church offers us a good place to experience such a healthy balance. That those who represent it are granted the wisdom to find and keep it.

Here we may learn through word and sacrament how to look at ourselves and at our fellow human beings through the eyes of Jesus. Eyes filled with his loving mercy as the best example to follow. Jesus sets us free to love our neighbours as what they are, namely just like us, all to be equally valued as God's beloved children. Amen