

St Brandon's  
Sermon for 20<sup>th</sup> August 2017  
Matthew 15. 21-28

Even The Dogs

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**INTRODUCTION: Not a nice story!**

Well, that wasn't a very nice story for a baptism! Why read *that*?

Well, we have readings set for each day – that's today's.

But demons tormenting a little girl? What's that even about? We don't really know: was this an illness? Or was something terribly wrong in this family, messing this child up? Don't know.

But the really awkward bit is that it seems Jesus wasn't going to help her! Are some little girls not welcome to God, because they are not from the right race and religion? Jesus seemed to be saying to this foreign mother, "I was sent only to the house of Israel."

**1. Only Israel?**

By the end of this short story, though, he has shown that is not true: he heals this foreign child, who's not an Israelite.

What happened? Was Jesus himself learning more about his own mission? Christians believe Jesus was God himself, walking this earth in human form; just as the child Jesus had to learn humanly to walk and talk, did the man Jesus grow in understanding of himself and what he had come to do? Was this a break-through moment in him realizing the one true God of all in whose name he'd come loves all?

Maybe. Or was Jesus there already, but knew people around him were not, that they thought he'd only come for Israel? And here was a moment to make the point dramatically that God loves all?

Maybe. Either way, the mother argues that there should be enough of God's love for all. Provocatively, she says, "Even the dogs get the scraps." And Jesus heals her daughter.

## **2. For all**

So this is a story of welcome, a great reading for a child's baptism.

And actually I can't think of a better Bible reading to hear today, after this particular week. People sometimes think faith, religion, the Bible, and God are irrelevant to real life, to anything that matters. Well, if anyone thinks this Bible story is irrelevant by the end of today's service, I'll refund your entrance fee in full!

It's hyper-relevant because we have just had a week marred by the violence of people who think there is only space in the world, or in their part of it, for people like them.

Whether someone is from Morocco or Ohio, or if they think the only people who matter are extreme Isis Islamists or white Americans – the effect is the same: it's saying that only some people, who think, look or believe the same, are welcome. And to show how little others even matter and just how unwelcome they are, vehicles have been used as weapons in Charlottesville and Barcelona.

Such beliefs leave no space for others, and declare them unwelcome.

And some thought Jesus too, an Israelite, had come only for Israelites, to welcome only them. But he chose a very different path. Here he

was, visiting a foreign place, foreign people. And in showing that God loves all and welcomes all could there be a more important message for our world today?

For many angry people in different places seem to be convinced that the problems they face must be someone else's fault, and if that *someone* else comes from *somewhere* else or looks different, so much the better they are to blame and to hate.

To confront such a terrifying creed, where do we look for a better story? The Christian faith points to God, who in Jesus declared all are loved, all are welcome.

### **3. Welcome in baptism**

And the event that we are here for today speaks of this: baptism is a moment of welcome. Esme Grace will be welcomed into the worldwide family of the church, in the name of God, in a few minutes.

So while some suggest there is only one kind of person welcomed by God – Isis Islamist, Confederate-flag waving white supremacist, whatever – Jesus says not.

Or perhaps it's not about race or religion, but it is only good people, those who deserve it, who are welcomed by God? Maybe Esme is welcome because she's a nice baby, with nice parents?

Not so either: and the clue's in the name today – Esme *Grace*.

### **4. Grace**

I think "grace" is my favourite word. It means God's underserved love, offered equally to all.

If you are here today – whether you come to church often or not – and think you'd be welcomed by God because you are a good enough or nice enough person, the Christian faith says you're wrong, actually.

And if you are here today – whether you come to church often or not – and think you'd *never* be welcomed by God because you are keenly aware of some ways that you have *not* been good or nice, the Christian faith says you're wrong too.

The grace of God means all are welcomed, a sick daughter and foreign mother 2,000 years ago, a happily healthy daughter today, and all of us, who are usually a messy mixture of good and bad, in all our differences, too.

For grace says the love of God is not **deserved**, just given. And grace says the love of God is not **reserved** for one kind of person and not another. And that is a message of both hope and resistance in an increasingly angry world where some say only some people matter, or are OK, or are welcome.

The grace of God says that is a lie, and to believe it is to be tragically mistaken about the deepest truth in our universe, that we are all loved by God, and forgiven too – when we need to be, and if we will receive that.

Into this faith of boundless welcome, of forgiveness for failure, and of limitless love Esme Grace is now to be baptised. May she grow learning the story of Jesus, in whom grace is given and can always be found, and may she grow to know the truth of how deeply and perfectly she is loved – and we all are loved – by God.

In the name of the God who is love, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.