

# Better than before

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> September 2024

Isaiah 35:4-7a

James 2:1-17

Mark 7:24-end

At a non-descript motorway services on the South East coast of Spain, the coffee was excellent. I was a bit surprised, though, to find a notice above the toilet sink saying “this sink is not suitable for washing feet.” There was a graphic of a foot and sink with a line through it, all very official. Such a carefully produced notice always has a story behind it. It was in Arabic, too. I realised that, here on the road between Benidorm and the ferry to North Africa, African Muslim tourists heading to and from holiday must regularly be stopping to say prayers before which they would wash hands and feet. On my way back to the car, I noticed a small, smart new building offering ideal washing facilities, signs again in Spanish and Arabic. It was rather heart warming. The story of minor cultural clash, clearly repeated often enough to warrant a notice, was not ended by the notice. Someone has gone further, pressing through the community irritation to find a new solution. We can only guess who paid for the facility, but clearly it showed a story of a journey from growing grumpiness, perhaps then feelings of rejection for Muslims only wanting to fulfil their prayerful obligations, then on to a kind of reconciliation where it’s even better than it was before any sink abuse crisis. From frustration and otherness to shared vision with new possibilities, and a sense of belonging for all. I wonder if, as I did, any non-Muslim travellers pause to think how little we pause for prayer.

There are quite a few Arabic road signs in southern Spain. Almost every city wall or hill top castle has a Moorish arch evoking the four centuries of Islamic rule. Many town names in Andalusia have the suffix “de la frontera”/ “of the frontier,” which dates from the time Andalusia remained under Islamic rule after the rest of the peninsula was back under Christian monarchs. That othering term “frontier” is sonorous. By the late fifteenth century, as Queen Isabella and her side kick King Ferdinand (I think it was that way around) asserted themselves, and their Catholic identity, they first expelled the last Muslim King and took charge, with a reasonably civil approach to any remaining Muslim and, indeed, Jewish citizens. Unfortunately, they felt the need to assert themselves more and more, making life harder and harder for the Jews and Muslims who were contributing so richly to the food and culture, let alone prayer life of their realm. Eventually, with the Inquisition they had founded in full swing, both were expelled altogether. Converts to Christianity were accepted, but then even they became the object of confected suspicion. Isabella and Ferdinand’s Catholic identity seemed greedy for the fuel of hatred of other faiths to keep itself burning. It was so unnecessary and, from a distance, looks not like confidence but more like fear.

A well to do church might look confident, tidy, well furnished because it has prosperous patrons, everyone looking their best as they make their way to worship. A special seat, perhaps, for the Lord Mayor, and maybe some famous people attending, so everyone feels dignified by association. But, James points out sharply, if the church does not greet the poor with dignity and shows class-based partiality, it does not really trust Jesus. What presents as confidence is in fact lack of confidence in the One who calls us. Importantly, the care for the poor is not merely to impress God. They are not trophies; they are not there to salve the consciences of the more prosperous. No, James insists the poor are teachers of the faith because to have faith at all in poverty is to have a lot of faith. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom? (v2:5) The church should be one place where the marginalised poor are restored to a dignified place in the community.

When Jesus’ privacy is invaded by a Syrian mother begging for her child to be healed he skirts dangerously on the edges of prejudice. What does Jewish confidence look like in that moment? What does it mean for him to be confident in his calling? He tests her with a brutal image: him as father feeding children and her as a scavenging dog. There is no exegetical way around the rudeness of this. Even if he was cracking a wry joke – an interpretation in favour – he is in the realm of Frank Skinner or Frankie Boyle. It sounds as though he’s testing himself as much as her. Who is the confident one in the room? Her response, rather than shouting insults back, is to roll with the nasty joke

and lead the conversation on. "If God is good, there's surely enough for both of us, Jesus." This is what Mark wants to convey. Chapter 6 5000 of God's children were fed and there were baskets of bread left over. Next chapter, there will be another 4000 fed. The conversation that tired Jesus out so he came to rest in this house was a long argument with the Pharisees about their black and white purity laws, Jesus challenging the fierce us and them attitudes which sound confident, but reveal fear.

By reaching across the divide, by meeting grumpiness with good humour, the woman opens up new possibilities. Whether Jesus was intending to help all along, or had his heart moved and expanded, the dynamic is one of expanding possibilities and restoration of community.

Moving on to another border town, the crowd there bring Jesus a local curiosity: a deaf, mute man. Doubly excluded from the community he suffers the additional indignity of being used by strangers who want to see a party trick. Jesus must have sensed this because he took him somewhere private for the intimate act of prayer and touch which would give him hearing and speech. Mark's comedic touch continues, though, with Jesus telling the man whose voice he has just restored not to tell anyone about it. This again highlights the motivation of the crowd, as well as his own. For us, Mark's hearers, we are asked to reflect on our motives for any act of apparent kindness. Is it for them or for us? Is it about forging a community that tends towards equalising and dignifying all, or is it about self-aggrandisement and self-publicity? There is a question we can ask Jesus, meanwhile. "Aren't your healing miracles part of the problem? Don't they let the community off the hook?" A friend of Ann and Matt living in London who uses a wheelchair says she doesn't feel disabled until she encounters barriers that make it impossible for her to access the toilet or the church or the gallery or cross the street safely. We have built an environment that disables. That she be able to enjoy Greenbelt this year is a testimony to the kind of communal effort that un-disables, and the kind of advocacy she has and continues to give as a gift not a threat to the church. Excluded, we would not have our hearts warmed by her vibrant faith, our perceptions broadened by her insight and political astuteness. The tantalising miracle for the deaf man with no voice begs the question of us today, what kind of community surrounding such a man would be patient to learn from him, to find new ways of communicating with and hearing him?

What kind of community around a Syrian mother needing help would hear her properly without first saying a grumpy "no"?

All this action is happening in a cultural borderland near the Greek influenced cities, reminding Mark's readers that the blessing of the Jewish people is a calling to be a blessing to all peoples. The church has a similar call to this day, in parallel with theirs. The litmus test of a blessed church, confident in Christ, is that it be a blessing to the rest of the world.

What a tragedy that when the church has had most power, as under Ferdinand and Isabela, and asserted herself most firmly, she has been...we have been least confident in Christ who said "blessed are the poor, for they really get the kingdom of heaven."

If Spain absorbed so gladly the culinary gifts of Jews and Muslims and realised, even after the expulsion, that some art was so beautiful that it should not be destroyed, then, as a culture and as a people of faith, they knew full well they could have continued to treasure the spiritual gifts and riches of Islam and Judaism, even after the political take over of power. There was simply no need to expel and persecute.

A highlight of the last three months was a visit to the Synagoga del Agua in Ubeda, Andalusia. Again, a town with traces of Moorish architecture and an old Jewish quarter, a beautiful renaissance city built as Silver looted from America fuelled the economy and so called Christianity was imposed on Native Americans with wild dogs, burnings, garrotting and forced baptism – there's a lack of confidence if ever you saw it. In 2007 a business man bought three old properties on a street corner, ripe for re-development. A hair dressers, a few oddly configured flats, a house with some grand panelling. As he stripped them down, various intriguing architectural clues were revealed and, with careful research a jigsaw puzzle came together revealing that what had been re-shaped many times, looking like

several dwellings, had once been a synagogue with a women's gallery, a worship space and, intriguingly, two wells. Decorated capitals resembled the patterns also made on some Jewish pastries through which stories of faith were handed on, often secretly. In the cellar, steps were cut further down to a rectangular pool, always filled with fresh spring water from below. The jigsaw complete, the businessman decided this was too precious to carve up and sell or rent out as a money maker. He reconstructed the worship space and gallery you can see there and researched the subsequent ownership. An Inquisitor had lived there. It was he who stripped away the outward signs of this Jewish place of worship. Intriguingly, he was a *Converso*, a Jewish convert. Was he removing the traces to assert his Catholicism or was he doing so to preserve the secret? We will never know, but the cultural and spiritual richness we now enjoy is thanks to him, and thanks to a 21C capitalist who saw the value of something much greater than the money-spinning possibility.

There was one more amazing thing to discover. It so happens that in four hundred years, no taller buildings had been erected to the south east of the hidden synagogue. There was something intriguing about that pool and those carefully carved steps. There are various known purifying rituals it would have been used for: a couple before a wedding for instance, acts of penitence and the like. But as restoration went on it was discovered that at the solstice, sunlight find its way through the courtyard, through the building, through a hatch in the floor, appearing first as a fiery filament across the back wall of the pool, then widening, spreading, touching the surface of the water, gold light filling the chamber, rippling across the rough stone roof. The head of the penitent in the pool would glow with a halo. For some thirty minutes anyone standing in the shafts of light could hold up the palms of their hands before them and their face be lit up with soft reflected light from their palms. I was so fortunate to be there around the solstice and to witness this gift, then to share a Sefardi lunch where the spiritual significance of foods and table rituals was shared by the Jewish chef.

What were the Inquisitors really afraid of? What kind of threat was this place? This culture? How many chances, and generous decisions preserved this hidden gift for us? How much bigger the world seems with such a discovery. How much richer.

We are left wondering what is hidden in our own communities, networks, neighbourhoods because prejudice has buried it. What glowing gifts are there in our midst, hidden by fear or clumsy exclusion? Who's halo can we not see? What might we perceive and set free if we really put our confidence in the one who came to restore the dignity of every human being?