

**Sermon for Hinde Street Methodist Church
Sunday 6th September 2015 10.00 am**

Old Testament reading: Proverbs 22.1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Gospel Reading: Mark 7.24-37

Sermon

I've been trying to imagine what it is like for the refugees as they walk through into Austria after several bewildering days in Hungary. They've come from war-torn places. The refugee camps on their borders are full. And they don't have enough money to provide sufficient food for those already there. So these refugees have travelled, crossing land or sea, hoping that someone will take pity on them. Many are heading for Germany and Sweden, because they've told they'll receive a welcome there, and they do not want to stay where they're not wanted – and what a welcome they received in Munich last night! In case we're in any doubt, Hungarian churches have been prohibited from sheltering refugees by the Roman Catholic archbishop of Budapest, on the grounds that they'd be human traffickers if they did so. As I've tried to imagine their experiences, the story of the Syrophenician woman, has kept returning to my mind.

It's one of my favourite Gospel stories. There isn't another story like it in the Bible. Moses comes close when he persuades God to change God's mind. But this woman does more than get Jesus to change his mind. Their encounter changes his understanding of his world and work. When he heals her daughter – even 'though he's said he's not come for outsiders but only for Israel – he's affirms that God's "yes for life" is for all and not just for the insiders.

The woman is known only known by her origins. Syrophenician. It's a familiar ploy. Syrians, Afghans, Somalis. Do they not have names? Of course they do! But without names they are distanced from us. It took the picture of a single drowned child, Aylan Kurdi, for a name to be given... The woman seeks Jesus out for help with her daughter. She begs him. He's her last hope. And she's heard he doesn't turn people away. She hasn't been bombed out. She's not homeless. She's not trying to find food or shelter. But like today's refugees, she fears for her daughter, who hangs in the balance between life and death... Jesus is resting. He's done all he can for today. He doesn't say I've done my share. I can't afford it. The nature of my country will be changed. But we don't expect what he does say. *"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."* Ouch! What would you feel like if someone said that to you? I haven't heard the refugees being called dogs (at least not in public), but they have been likened to insects, to cockroaches, swarms... The Syrophenician woman doesn't give up. She knows what she wants. And she believes God wants it too. So she answers Jesus back. *"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* In her reflections on today's readings, Karoline Lewis (workingpreacher.org), says this. *"The woman tells the truth. And when the truth gets told? Worlds change. Her world changed. It was the same for Jesus... The rest of his ministry cannot be the same because of her. We think we want our world to change, but do we really? It's easier to choose to remain where we are. It takes a lot less effort to live lives of falsehood than to muster the energy to move from lies to honesty. Telling the truth takes risk. It takes courage..."* You'll have already guessed that I want us to ask what the implications of this story are for the way we – Europe's insiders - relate to the refugee outsiders seeking our help. What is the truth? What are the lies? On Tuesday morning, at

the beginning of the new Connexional year, I received an email from Donald Eadie, a retired minister living in Birmingham. He'd sent it to several people and called it "A story for a time such as this." I think it helps us to grasp the truth that the Syrophenician's story invites us to live.

On 23rd July 2011, 37 people, 9 families, arrived in a small village called Nås in Sweden. They were asylum seekers designated by the immigration authority to wait there until they learned whether or not they were granted permission to stay in Sweden. They were given temporary accommodation in vacant flats across the bridge from the village. 'Though there isn't much in the village, a shop, a pizzeria and a Chapel, the Missionhus. The congregation is very small, just a handful of people, and they don't have a minister, but they're open, welcoming and hospitable. In the summer of 2011 Siv Hansson was approaching retirement and seeking God's guidance for her future. She offered to God a variety of options. One day she was at a village meeting. A representative of the Local Authority was asking for help with the asylum seekers' needs. Clothing, shoes and boots, toys, prams, bicycles, a place to store and distribute what the local people were giving, and a place to meet. Siv is normally cautious, but on this occasion her overwhelming impulse was to be spontaneous, and the next morning at a prayer meeting she shared her plans. In the afternoon she prepared a leaflet, an invitation to 'fika' (coffee and cookies), went to the flats occupied by the asylum seekers, found some of the women talking with each other and handed them the invitation. Somehow she communicated the warmth of genuine welcome. And on Wednesday 27th July 2011 – 4 days after the asylum seekers had arrived - while her friend Berit prepared the coffee, buns and cookies, Siv met the families, walked with them over the bridge, and led them to the chapel. Every Wednesday since that day, asylum seekers push prams, cycle and walk across the bridge to what has become known as Coffee House: the open house for all. They come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine, Syria, Somalia, Nigeria, Albania and Azerbaijan. They came to a place of waiting. In the months that followed, some returned to their country of origin, some to the country of their first entry into Europe, others were granted permits to make Sweden their new home. Through all the pain and relief of the leaving and arriving, the warmth of hospitality in The Open House for all, is still offered and has grown through help with translation, accompanying people to appointments, teaching and learning Swedish, support managing money, a second hand store shared with a neighbouring village, and many other activities. There are challenges, not least different languages, but both asylum seekers and volunteers are discovering the human being in each other. In July, there was a party to celebrate four years of hospitality, and Siv said this. *We have met people of other faiths and cultures, we are learning to accept each other, we like each other, nobody leaves their home and work without a good reason. For us life has become meaningful.* The team of volunteers has grown to 10. The goodwill and generosity in the wider community increases. The asylum seekers still enjoy coffee and cookies as they wait for news. The men sit together sharing stories. And the women sit around the edge. The children play, sing, and dance. None of this was on the list Siv had offered God for her new life. Yet she prays with thankfulness for the ways God continues to provide.

Donald's story is a story that could be told of many communities all over Europe, including Britain, and added to by those helping the refugees who have recently landed on Europe's shores. The people of Nas have acted as Jesus eventually did in his encounter with the Syrophenician woman. They have overcome suspicion and fear, and the feeling that their

resources were being poached, to offer life to exhausted and traumatised people. I don't want to suggest that that is easy. But it is what's beginning to happen as a result of the pictures of Aylan Kurdi. Of course there are other voices too. And we won't all agree on a political solution to the crisis. But I wonder 'though, if after this week, we're closer to agreeing one thing, the thing that matters most, the thing the Syrophenician woman taught Jesus. Each person - whether or not we know their names - is a human being. They have the hopes and dreams for their lives like us. And the same value in God's eyes. For God loves us whoever or however we are. The challenge to us is - will we open ourselves to offer them – what we believe God gives us? Yes to life – yes to fullness of life for all - whatever it costs those of us have more. This is the truth we are called to speak and act on. Anything else is lies. Amen.

Sunday 6th September 2015