



**Sermon preached by Revd Deborah McVey, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2026**

**Readings:** *Isaiah 56.1, 6-8; Romans 11. 1-2a, 29-36; Matthew 15.21-28*

**Trinity 11**

***Is Jesus still learning? Are we?***

May I speak and may we all ponder standing under the Name of the Living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Isaiah's vision of God bringing people from all nations to God's holy mountain is an inspiration. Preparing for today and deciding to use the alternative reading for this Sunday was in my mind as I watched the crowds gather to witness the solar eclipse this week. Pallab Ghosh, science correspondent, was there in Spain and was visibly moved by this spectacle, he said he had witnessed it before, this time it was a spiritual experience. He said, "*this solar eclipse reminds us of what it is to be human, we live on a small planet in a big cosmos.*" He could hardly form words immediately after the event when interviewed, he was so affected.

It happened for us in microcosm, we were experimenting with a couple of colanders and a big sheet of white card, out on our forecourt. It's often been a gathering place since covid as we encouraged neighbours to bring their own refreshment every Friday early evening, once we were allowed to, to sit on spaced chairs and enjoy each other's company, this has continued every first Friday since then. No sooner had we set up card and colander a neighbour came and told us we needed one with smaller holes! It worked, and soon, about four neighbour's colanders appeared above the card. We all had a super chat about it all which included sharing where we had seen the 1999 eclipse and whether people had found it a spiritual experience. It was a very flat Cambridge equivalent of God's Holy mountain. Gathering in community for a common purpose. It was certainly joyful. *My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.*

It happened too this week and over the past four weeks, when fifteen or so church friends gathered in the comfy Macallister room upstairs. We shared those significant objects, places and people who have inspired us in our lives, finally sharing what has most nourished us on our Christian journey. Friends were visibly moved as they heard of the deep experiences of others, the struggle at times to put words around the experience, we found what others shared made connections and resonance with their own lives.

*My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.* Isaiah was envisioning the return from exile after a long stretch in Babylon, spelling out that God's good news would be for all people including the Babylonians who they lived amongst. God is not confined to the sacredness of Temple or any place. Forecourts, upper rooms, mountain tops, all have space for the wide variety, diversity of human beings. You will think of your own special places and people as I speak.

*My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.* These middle chapters of Romans see Paul trying to make sense of why the Jewish believers had not committed to Christ, when he had himself. Jesus has been sent by God as their promised Messiah but they rejected him. There were deep divisions between Jewish and Gentile leaders in the church. Paul himself a Jew convert has to work out how Israel stands with God. It's a complicated argument but he comes to realise that God has not rejected God's own chosen people: v.29 "*for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.*" God promised Abraham that salvation would come firstly to the Jews, then to the rest of the world. They are both the bearers and the beneficiaries of this promise. Gentile and Jew together are all part of God's family. It is still so. Both groups, Paul writes, have much in common; both have lived lives of disobedience, they are equal in that respect, so both, all, are worthy of receiving mercy and grace according to God's promises.

*My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.* God's grace will be shared with all, of every race, colour, or creed. The hints were clearly there in Isaiah. The church of Paul's time is learning fast as the church grows rapidly. Paul himself is learning, working out the argument, drawing on God's grace as he writes to enable others to grasp the universality of the good news of Jesus.

We all learn in different ways, this often chimes with our personalities and diverse neuro make up. Do we learn best in argument or debate, or do we take time in deep study and listening to explore with others in the faith community. These summer house groups have been another experience of deep listening, not

debating or arguing, but what I'd call holy listening, which leads one to understand the other person. That is usually essential for faith sharing.

*My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.*

Grace faith and persistence definitely pervade this encounter of Jesus with the Canaanite woman in Matthew's gospel, it is a healing story, healing on different levels. Healing for the sick daughter, healing for the woman, healing for the disciples and dare I say, healing for Jesus. The woman is not Jewish, not male, so unlikely to be given much regard, even by Jesus at this stage. Surely Jesus must have been exhausted at this point, feeding five thousand, healing myriads of sick people who would be happy even to touch the fringe of his cloak to be made well. One can imagine the throng he has retreated from, maybe for some peace and prayer. His conversation with this woman gets off to a bad start anyway as she is shouting at him, not the best way to begin, she is desperate to get her message over to him. A desperate mum, whose daughter is very ill. Jesus ignores her, it is a brush off. But he must have realised that she recognised him for who he was, Lord, Son of David. She begged for mercy. The disciples think they are helping him, "Send her away", they didn't like her shouting either. Understandable. They, we, sometimes get in the way. Jesus tells her he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He is here to fulfil God's promises. Jesus! What did Isaiah prophecy?

*My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.*

Did she quieten and formulate her argument, she says "Lord help me." This is more appealing, will he soften? Not yet, he refers to the woman as a dog, which was a common expression used by Jews to those who were non-Jewish. It sounds offensive. But she appears to take no offense and repeats her plea adding that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. In other words, she would be more than happy to share in the excess that the Jewish people do not need. This is the moment when Jesus sees her faith, the kingdom has broken in, and at that very moment he praises her faith and tells her that her daughter is healed. Yes! He's got it! *My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.*

It is interesting that straight after this encounter Matthew has Jesus back to the Sea of Galilee, up a mountain presumably to pray, but little chance as yet again more and more people flock to him for healing, and then to give praise to God. Then another feeding, this time of four thousand.

My question then, at this stage in his ministry, is Jesus still learning about God's realm? I had a moment to discuss my thoughts on this with a friend and she thought it might be better to ask, "Was Jesus still learning?" There's no doubt this unnamed foreign woman changed him in that present moment. My wonder is that these living encounters continue to change us too, we are still learning with the Spirit of Jesus guiding. Jesus is not in the past, Jesus is in the present with us, through his wondrous Holy Spirit. Matthew emphasises that on all these occasions God's realm is very present, here and now in the ordinary but extraordinary everyday moments of human life.

Are we still learning? Are we still listening to the Spirit and expecting surprises in our faith journey? The living word very often captures me when I most need it. The night before a carefully prepared Service of Thanksgiving I was leading for a dear friend of ours in Newcastle upon Tyne, I woke to this verse from Corinthians. *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no heart has imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.* 1Corinthians 2.9 It is a verse within Paul's teaching on the Holy Spirit. I felt ministered to that morning on behalf of those who would be at that service who were not Christian. I needed to include this as a way of helping people know God would be with us all helping us in the most surprising ways. All we have to do is to love God.

*My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.* Isaiah knew, this woman, a foreigner, knew that Jesus was Lord, Son of David. He was the Lord who could heal her daughter with those crumbs of excess which were not needed by the Jewish community. An example of abundance becoming blessing. God's promises are confirmed in her on this day, healing, rescue, salvation has come to this one of the gentiles.

*My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations.* May we always reach out to those within and without our many different communities who might seem 'foreign' or 'outsiders.' May we reflect God's generosity towards us by reaching out, as individuals and as churches. Then we might be surprised as to how much we will learn, about God, about others and about ourselves. Let's be generous with our gifts, our graces, our time and money and learn even more of God whom we know in Jesus' mercy, compassion and forgiveness and love. So be it.