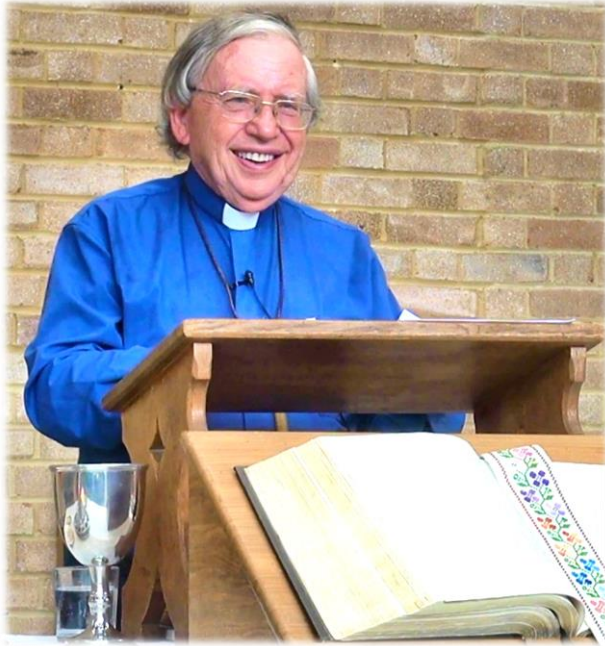


Communion Service Sunday 16th August – led by Revd David Aplin



The day's reading was about the Canaanite woman and her great faith. David had prepared a sermon, but when he'd returned from celebrating his 56th wedding anniversary, his computer seemed to have taken a holiday of its own. Sometimes (he felt) we were reminded not to place too much faith in technology, but to trust God instead.

Faith That Trusted God's Way

The reading had been about a woman who'd asked Jesus to heal her daughter. It raised an important question: what did it mean to have faith?

Faith was Not Control

When David had been at Oak Hill College, he'd attended a healing service. Two people with a recognised healing ministry had come to lead part of the service. Some students had received healing, and many of those present had sensed the presence of the Holy Spirit.

But then some of the students had demanded healing for the course-leader who had terminal cancer. They'd seemed to believe that if the

right people prayed in the right way, with the right words and rituals, then healing would *have* to happen. That was not faith. We might believe in miracles, but we could not organise them. We could ask for God's help, but we could not order God to act according to our wishes. God's help often came as strength, peace, and support. We knew from the Old Testament particularly that horrible things had happened and that God had not intervened. God had responded in his own way.

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

The Canaanite woman did not come to Jesus as though she could command him. She came because she had seen, or heard, what he could do. She believed that, if he chose, her daughter could be healed. That was her great faith: not a demand, but trust. She believed in Jesus' power and appealed to his mercy. Jesus answered her, "Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted."

Faith in the Face of Evil and Fear

The Bible also told us that Jesus drove out evil spirits. Today, people might find that difficult to talk about, and we rightly recognised that some suffering could be connected with mental illness. The Scripture did not avoid the subject of evil, and neither should we pretend that it was never real.

David had once met a woman who came seeking help. She had already gone from church to church asking for prayer against what she believed was an evil spirit. He'd remembered advice from people in the Church of England whose ministry involved this kind of work: never go alone. So he'd taken someone with him. Over time, the woman had spoken about the spirit in different ways. At first, it seemed to comfort her. Then it became pleading and fearful. Later, it became threatening. As the situation changed, David had become increasingly convinced that this was not simply in her mind. The key issue was faith and will. The woman had to want to be free. She had to stop clinging to the thing that frightened her and trust God to release her. She'd prayed with a cross in her hand, and through faith she'd found freedom.

Faith and the Future of the Church

This led David to our own church and its future. It was tempting for us to think only in terms of decline: to continue as we were until the money ran out, the building closed, and someone turned it into flats or homes. It was true that we did not currently have the families and resources that would make things easier. But that did not mean nothing could be done. We might need to think differently about the resources we did have. Instead of using all available funds on the building, perhaps some could be invested in people and mission: someone who could help us plan, organise, reach out, and make things happen. If we wanted the church to have a future, we had to be willing to invest in it. If this was the kind of work God wanted us to do, then we should have faith that God would help us as we made the effort.

The Challenge

The challenge was this: did we have faith in the future of our church? The second candle had been for faith in our church and its future. We should be asking what we could do to pass the church on to the next generation, not as a burden, but as a living witness.

- We should not say, "It is too difficult."
- We should have faith that God would help us.
- We had to be willing to put in the effort.
- We had to be bold enough at least to try.