

Sermon for The Second Sunday in Lent
St Marylebone Parish Church, Sunday 12th March 2017
BCP: Matthew 15.21-28, RCL: John 3.1-17
The Revd Edward Thornley

People don't like uncertainty. Some people like surprises, but most are probably not so happy accepting not knowing. Especially when something is troubling, we would rather know what's happening than be left in the dark.

In both lectionaries this morning, the Gospels appointed say a lot about uncertainty in the face of God. In the Prayer Book, at the 8.30, Matthew's Gospel tells of the Canaanite woman who asks Jesus to rid her daughter of a demon. When she asks for help the response is not exactly "affirming." The disciples tell Jesus to move her aside. When she persists, Jesus says, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" Charming.. and helpful.. But she responds, "*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*" Jesus is astounded at her humility, and courage, her faith, and immediately her daughter is healed. So, there is healing. But the initial response was maybe not what one expected, especially from God.

Then, at the 11, in the Revised Common Lectionary, we hear John tell us of when Nicodemus visited Jesus, and asked all the questions *he'd* ever wanted. And Jesus explains the beauty of being born again in God. But he doesn't make it easy. He doesn't say, "Well, Nicodemus, this is how it works..." Rather, Jesus offers a deep, poetic description of the Spirit's operation: "*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the*

sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

It's hard when God doesn't tell you the answers. It's easy to be angry, to walk away. When you ask, and the response isn't what you expected, or wanted, and you end up with more questions than the one you started with. But what if God is not about explanations, at least not on our terms? What if God's Spirit, in all its mystery, doesn't tell, but *moves* us?

The Greek for “wind,” πνεῦμα, which also means “breath,” is essentially at one with πνεύματος at the end of the same verse in John, which means “Holy Spirit.” So we might say that the Spirit is like the wind, the breath of God. So when you feel or hear the wind, the sensation of what you cannot see but you can certainly *know*, and even breathe into the depth of your own self; you've encountered God.

The very life we are given is infused with the purpose of God. Sometimes it's strong, it stops you in your tracks. Sometimes it gently reminds you. Sometimes you can use words. Others you can't. But like the woman who's faith was tested. Like Nicodemus listening to every breath from Jesus' mouth. This Lent, we too can learn to live again. Where, instead of justifying or dismissing what we can't understand, we accept that it is when we are uncertain, even affronted before God, that we notice our breathing, our heart, and, though bemused, even hurt, we can overcome the distance we created, by being attentive to the minutest particulars of our life.

“If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” Sin separates us. Attention re-connects us. Lent is the wilderness, baffling openness, where we will know God again, if we allow him to show us who we are. Take a deep breath.