

## MATT 7.6: DO BE DISCERNING

[Chelmsford 24 June 2012]

We live in an age of political correctness:

- no longer should we speak of ladies and gentlemen, but of men and women;
- no longer should we speak of the handicapped, but of the disabled;
- no longer should we speak of the educationally sub-normal but rather of people with learning difficulties.

***Jesus would have failed the test of political correctness.***

Jesus could be quite earthy in his language - and no more so than in the verse which forms our text this morning. Matt 7.6: "**Do not give what is holy to dogs – they will only turn and attack you. Do not throw your pearls in front of pigs - they will only trample them under foot.**"

Although these words of Jesus have been interpreted in various ways, everybody is agreed upon one thing: ***Jesus was not talking literally about animals, but about people.*** Jesus was likening some people to curs in the street - and others to swine.

Goodness, this language does not exactly sit happily with the picture of Jesus many have of being "gentle, meek and mild". But then Jesus was no spineless wimp. Jesus was a strong character - and Jesus could say, and indeed do, pretty tough things.

To understand what Jesus was saying we need to look at more closely at the animal pictures he drew.

- When Jesus spoke of **dogs**, he did not have in mind cuddly pets with wagging tails and affectionate natures, friendly creatures that love to have their backs scratched. They were semi-wild hounds that roamed the streets and hills, tongues hanging from their mouths and burrs clinging to their filthy coats as they foraged for food in savage packs. They were not the kind of dog you would want your child to touch. They were the kind of dog you needed to beware of.
- When Jesus spoke of **pigs**, he did not have in mind the frolicking piglets of Marsh Farm. Remember, Jesus was a Jew, and for Jews pigs were loathsome 'unclean' animals - not to be eaten in any circumstances. No worse fate could have befallen the Prodigal Son than to have had to look after pigs. A job cleaning toilets all day in a service station would have been infinitely preferable. Furthermore, pigs were not simply 'unclean' animals - they were violent animals. The Palestinian domestic pig was probably derived from the European wild boar. You had to watch your step if you encountered one of them.

Yes, we need to bear all this in mind when we hear Jesus saying: "**Do not give what is holy to the dogs - don't throw your pearls in front of pigs**". The common underlying theme is that we should not give anything of value to wild animals.

1. In the first place Jesus says don't feed "**what is holy**" being fed to dogs. The food in question was no ordinary food, but food that had been consecrated in temple worship and set aside to be eaten only by the priests and their families.

To give such food to dogs would have been tantamount to sacrilege. A bit like a Roman Catholic priest giving the remains of consecrated communion bread to the ducks - the faithful would be horrified.

2. Jesus envisages a man feeding pearls to some wild pigs. In every sense of the word, an act of madness. What's more, this unthinkable act would not be met with any form of appreciation - rather it would simply madden the pigs even more. Because when they discovered that the pearls were too hard to chew, quite tasteless, and utterly unappetizing, they would become even more fierce. Enraged, the wild animals spit out the pearls, turn on the man, and tear him to pieces.

Beware of the dog - beware of the pig too.

Be discerning about what you give these animals.

There is only one other place in Scripture where these two animals are brought together, and that is in 2 Peter 2.22. There Peter talks about certain "**false teachers**" and their followers. He applies to them two proverbs: "**A dog goes back to what it has vomited**"; and "**A pig that has been washed goes back to roll in the mud**".

Not the most edifying of pictures!

Who did Jesus have in mind? Who were the people he likened to dogs and the pigs?

- Narrow-minded *orthodox Jews* in Jesus' day would have identified the dogs and pigs with any kind of sinner - and not least with Gentile sinners who did not belong to the Jewish faith. *The Gentiles* were beyond the pale, outside the covenant people, condemned to perish unless they embraced the Jewish faith and accepted the Law of Moses.  
Did Jesus have the Gentile world in mind? Surely not. Jesus never discriminated on racial grounds. True, for the most part Jesus worked amongst Jews - yet he was not averse to helping non-Jews too. My mind goes to the occasion when Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion and marvelled at his faith. On another occasion he healed the daughter of a distraught Syrian mother. Far from condemning the Gentiles, he had some very harsh words to say about the Jewish religious leaders of his day - calling them "**hypocrites**" & "**whitewashed tombs**". When Jesus spoke of not casting pearls before swine he was not speaking of man-made distinctions like those of race and class.
- At a very early stage in the history of the early church this text became associated with the Lord's Supper, and the dogs and the pigs became *the unbaptised*.  
In the Didache, the first service order book of the Christian church, to be dated around 100 AD, we find these words: "*Let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptised into the name of the Lord; for as regards this, the Lord has said, 'Give not that which is holy unto dogs'*" The unbaptised were actually asked to leave the service when the Lord's Supper was about to be celebrated.  
Similarly in another document of the early church, the Apostolic Constitutions, we read that at the beginning of the Lord's Supper a deacon should say: "*Let none of the catechumens (i.e. those still under instruction), let none of the hearers (i.e. those who had come to the service because they were interested in the Christian faith), let none of the unbelievers, let none of the heretics, stay here*". In those days the Lord's Table was well and truly fenced. In many ways the early church was a bit like the Exclusive Brethren. But no NT scholar today would ever suggest that Jesus here had the unbaptised and the Lord's Supper in mind.

Who then did Jesus have in mind? Clearly Jesus was not referring to unbelievers in general. Why, at the end of this Gospel we find the Ascending Lord Jesus telling his disciples to "**go and make disciples of all nations**". [In the words of John Calvin, it is our duty "*to present the doctrine of salvation indiscriminately to all*"].

**The dogs & the pigs are those who persistently ridicule & mock the Christian faith;** those who have as much appreciation for the things of God as dogs have for food that has been consecrated in temple worship, and as pigs have for pearls.

They are not simply people who are far away from God, but people who have decisively - even defiantly - turned their backs on God (so Stott).

"*It ought to be understood*", said John Calvin, "*that **dogs and swine** are names given not to every kind of debauched men, or to those who are destitute of the fear of God and of true godliness, but to those who, by clear evidences, have manifested a hardened contempt of God, so that their disease appears to be incurable*"..

Chrysostom, the great 4th century bishop of Constantinople, said something very similar, when he identified the "**dogs**" as people "*living in incurable godliness*".

I.e. Jesus was saying that there are occasions when it is not right to share the Gospel. There are times when we need to be discerning.

The Rabbis actually said something similar about the Law: "*Even as a treasure must not be shown to everyone, so with the words of the Law; one must not go deeply into them, except in the presence of suitable people*".

The difference between the Rabbis and Jesus was that the Rabbis felt only respectable people were suitable for discovering the treasures of the Law - whereas Jesus had the deepest of concerns for the outcasts of his society - people such as tax-collectors and prostitutes.

Yet even Jesus felt there were times when a line should be drawn - there were times when discernment was called for.

- I find it significant that when Jesus came before King Herod and then before Pontius Pilate, he had nothing to say to them. Jesus at his trial made no attempt to win over these two men. Both these men were much too corrupt and much too cynical in their approach to God and to life. They were far too hardened, to listen to his message concerning the Kingdom of God.
- When Jesus sent out the twelve on their first mission, he warned them that some people would be unreceptive of their message: "**If some home or town will not welcome you or listen to you, then leave that place and shake the dust off your feet**". (Matt 10.14). There comes a point when to persist in offering the gospel is to invite its rejection with contempt and even blasphemy.
- Paul likewise seems to have adopted the same principle. E.g. Luke tells us that at Corinth when the Jews "**opposed him and said evil things about him, he protested by shaking the dust from his clothes and saying to them, 'If you are lost, you yourselves must take the blame for it! I am not responsible. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'**" (Acts 18.6).

So what does all this have to say to us?

It seems to me that there are a number of lessons which we may draw from this passage

## 1. The Gospel is of immense value

Let's begin by reminding ourselves that the Gospel is of immense value.

I know that we must not press every detail of the stories and pictures Jesus told and drew, but nonetheless I believe it is no accident that Jesus spoke of pearls rather than of gravel. The Gospel is of infinite worth.

My mind goes to one of the very short parables Jesus told and which Matthew includes at a later point in his Gospel: "**The kingdom of heaven is like this. A man is looking for fine pearls, and when he finds one that is unusually fine, he goes and sells everything he has, and buys that pearl**" (Matt 13.45,46).

The good news which is to be found in Jesus is worth every penny we have - it is beyond price - it is wonderful beyond words.

For in Jesus our sins are forgiven - in Jesus there is promise of a life which goes beyond the grace. There is nothing which can compare.

Here is then a challenge.

And the challenge is this: discover for yourself the precious gift of all that Jesus offers – forgiveness for the past, meaning for the present, hope for the future.

Compared to Jesus all the good things of this life are worthless.

For everything else in this world is of passing value – whereas life in God's kingdom is of eternal worth.

There is nothing more wonderful in discovering the wonder of God's love for you in Jesus.

## 2. Not all appreciate its value

But Jesus was a realist. He knew from his own experience, that not all would accept God's offer of a new life in his Kingdom.

- There are those who accept the good news, and there are those who do not.
- There are those who accept with alacrity, and sadly there are those who turn their backs on Jesus.

Some, like dogs being offered consecrated food and pigs confronting pearls, are utterly insensitive to what is before them.

They are unable to appreciate the value of what is being offered.

Indeed, it is more than that they are unappreciative.

They mock and they ridicule what is being offered to them.

[NB Carson: "*Their cynical mockery, their intellectual arrogance, their love of moral decay, and their vaunted self-sufficiency make them utterly impervious to the person and words of Christ*"].

Sadly there are those who almost seem to have a pathological hatred for the Christian faith. I think for instance of Richard Dawkins, who is so extreme in his diatribes against the Christian faith that even some of his atheist friends are embarrassed.

Sadly, Dawkins is not alone: there are a host of people in the media today who seem to have a thing against the church. It saddens me to see the way in which the church is constantly mocked by some.

I find it a comfort to realise that Jesus knew that this would be the case.

### 3. Be discerning in those with whom you share your faith

We need to be discerning when it comes to telling others of the good news of Jesus. Yes, Jesus is for all - and yet sadly not everyone is open to hearing that good news. There are times when our enthusiasm for the Christian faith, far from cutting any ice, confirms people in their agnosticism or atheism.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes we read: there is a "**time for silence**" and a "**time to talk**" (3.7). It is against this background that we need to interpret the words of Jesus: "**Do not give what is holy to dogs - do not throw your pearls in front of pigs**".

Jesus is saying that we need to be strategically-minded when it comes to our evangelism.

Think of the parable of the Sower: in that parable we read not only of good soil, but also of hard soil, of rock soil, of stony soil.

There are soils in which it is pointless to sow the seed of the word.

Shouting our heads off on the street corner about Jesus is not sensible. We need to be discerning and major rather on those most likely to be responsive to the love of Jesus. In the first place such people are friends and neighbours.

Sharing our faith with those whom we know is actually more effective than sharing our faith with those whom we do not know.

Needless to say, at this point we discover a further challenge.

Yes, there is a 'time for silence' – but there is also a 'time to talk'

True, there is no point in throwing pearls before pigs – but there are times when we need to speak of the pearl of great price – of the amazing difference that Jesus makes to life.

### 4. There are no limits to loving

There is a final challenge – and that is this: if there are limits to faith-sharing, there are never limits to loving. Indeed, within this same Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared: "**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**" (Matt 5.44)

Love can never be limited to those who might be potential believers - love is to be all-inclusive. However cynical, however mocking, however hardened people may appear to be against the Christian faith, we are still called to love them.

And therein lies hope even for the "**dogs**" and the "**pigs**" - for those stubbornly turn their backs upon Christ. For the hope is that the love of God in action may break down the highest of barriers, may warm the hardest of hearts.

I think, for instance, of a person who is now a close friend of mine. But when I first knew him, he was not a Christian - and nothing I said could ever convince him of the truth as it is in Jesus. But eventually he came to faith - and he came to faith as a result of reading Malcolm Muggeridge's book *Something Beautiful for God*, a book which tells the story of Mother Teresa's love for the poor.

The fact is that love can melt the hardest of hearts.

So, let's ensure that we do love – and let's see people opening their hearts to Jesus precisely because of the love we have shown them.