

11th Sunday after Pentecost

(Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Romans 11:1-2, 29-32, Matthew 15:21-28)

Have you ever felt like an “outsider” - times when you don't fit in? Has someone, or a group of people ever rejected you and do you recall how hurt you felt at that time? Well I am sure that is how that Gentile woman must have felt in the gospel story this morning.

Today's Gospel is one of the more difficult readings in the Bible, one that has often been misinterpreted. The reason it is troubling, is the language that is being used. At first glance it seems that Jesus wants nothing to do with this Gentile woman and it seems that He uses harsh words. It reminds me of the instance recorded earlier in Matthew's account of the gospel, when Jesus was busy with the crowds, and His disciples reminded Him that His mother and brothers wanted to speak to Him outside and Jesus replied, what has been perceived as harshly, *“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”* Pointing to his disciples, he said, *“Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”* (Mt 12:46-50).

Jesus had moved into the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon, which today is known as Lebanon and the dialogue seems to focus on the question of how far a Gentile might expect any benefit from a Jewish Messiah. The woman is presented as a Canaanite woman, meaning she was not of the children of Israel. In biblical times, dogs were seen as ritually unclean animals so to call someone a dog was one of the most derogatory comments that could be made. Therefore, the troubling part of this passage is the implication that Jesus is using offensive language toward this woman. The passage begs a question: Is this really how a Messiah should be referencing other people?

In order to interpret this passage correctly, we need to understand that dog was a term the Jews commonly applied to the Gentiles, because the Jews considered these pagan people no more likely than dogs to receive God's blessing. Jesus was reflecting the Jewish attitude so as to contrast it with His own. This woman agreed to be considered a dog as long as she could receive God's blessing for her daughter. We are reminded of the clear readiness and faith of another pagan, the Centurion, when he told Jesus: *I am not worthy to have you under my roof, just give the word and my servant will be cured* (Mt 8: 8).

Perhaps Jesus was testing both this woman's faith and teaching His disciples an important lesson concerning the worth of all people created in the image of God. He might have been asking the woman whether she believed, like His disciples did, that she was like an unclean animal. In the passage just prior to this morning's reading, Jesus had been discussing with the Pharisees their question why Jesus and His disciples continued to break the laws of cleanliness by eating with unclean hands. Jesus had reminded them of their hypocrisy telling them that it was more important what came out of their mouths than what went into them. They had rejected Him, thinking they had all they needed; the towns refused to repent, believing they were without fault and here Jesus was dealing with a foreign woman who had already acknowledged Him as the Messiah, the son of David. In contrast to the Pharisees, this woman was willing to humbly eat scraps from the table of the Israelites, and Jesus was willing to humble Himself on the Cross for all, despite being the King of kings.

The truth of the matter is that Jesus seeks those who recognise their need to be saved - to repent - to follow Him, and to exercise real faith.

This Canaanite woman displayed true faith and she is an exceptionally good example of faithful prayer to each one of us. Her prayer is almost perfect: she recognises and proclaims Jesus as the Messiah (the Son of David) — which contrasts with the unbelief of the Jews; she expresses her need in clear, simple words; she is persistent, undismayed by obstacles; and she expresses her request in all humility: *“Have mercy on me”*. Faith does not always make things easy. Our prayer should have the same qualities of faith, trust, perseverance, humility, and courage and above all love.

Looking at this encounter from a slightly different angle, Christ is passively asking, "Do you believe what my disciples think of you, that you are an unclean animal?" From this perspective, Jesus can be seen as holding a mirror up to the disciples, revealing their prejudice and bigotry and challenging the woman to stand up for her dignity in the face of hatred. Perhaps Christ is allowing her to realise that He sees her differently and sees within her the potential and the likeness in which she was created.

Christ, by healing her daughter, sends a strong message to His disciples that He has come both for the Jewish people and the Gentiles as well.

It is interesting that Jesus did not respond to the woman's pleas immediately, for it was only after His disciples exhorted Jesus to send her away because she was becoming a nuisance. When Jesus did reply, His words are initially seen to be unsettling as He says what appears to be very exclusive, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel”* (24).

Jesus knew that His mission, focused initially on Israel, would reach out to the wider pagan world. Jesus was teaching His disciples the priority and course of His mission. Israel was to be given every opportunity to accept the Messiah, precisely because Israel was to be the firstborn of all the nations and God wanted them to present the message of salvation to the rest of the world. However, we know that His own people rejected him.

Paul reminds us of this in his letter to the Romans, that the refusal of the Jews to believe in the Good News of the gospel, prompted his mission to the Gentiles. However, Paul warns us that God's gifts and call to the Jews will not be taken back (29). And that it would be easier to graft them back into the vine than it was to graft in the Gentiles. For God's desire is that all shall be reconciled to Him through Christ (Col 1:20).

The passage from Isaiah this morning reminds us of the universal love that God in Christ has for all people of the world. The Israelites had just returned from Exile and Isaiah is encouraging them to accept foreigners and so God reminds us through His prophet Isaiah, *“For my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations”* (7). So too with the Great Commission that Christ sent His disciples out to the ends of the world, *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”* (Mt 28:19).

In our busy, confusing and frustrating worlds, we all need to be reminded of the dignity that all people possess. A common theme of **identity** runs through all the readings this morning and the understanding of identity will impact on our relationships within our communities. The challenge to all of us is to be reconciled across the prejudicial barriers and divides one encounters in life. The psalm this morning 133, stresses the importance of unity in a community.

I so pray that we may be able to see in our neighbour, an expression of God's love, regardless of the superficial scars and masks they may have - that could lead us to a prejudicial impression. We also need to embrace our own dignity and never think of ourselves as not deserving of God's love and mercy.

I wish to conclude with words of encouragement concerning our journey of faith from Pope Francis, *"We entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that He will help us to persevere in faith. The Spirit infuses boldness in the heart of believers; He gives our life and our Christian witness the strength of conviction and persuasion; He encourages us to overcome disbelief towards God and indifference towards our brothers"*.

I pray that you may all experience the love of Christ in your lives this week. Keep safe and take care.

God bless

Fr John