

The Church's prayer for this Sunday - The tenth Sunday after Trinity

Lord of heaven and earth,
as Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer,
give us patience and courage never to lose hope,
but always to bring our prayers before you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 16th August 2020, The tenth Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 67

The Nations Called to Praise God

To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song.

- ¹May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
- ²that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
- ³Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
- ⁴Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
- ⁵Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
- ⁶The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
- ⁷May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Today's reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8

The prophet Isaiah speaks about God's covenant being open to all people.

The Covenant Extended to All Who Obey

- ¹Thus says the Lord:
Maintain justice, and do what is right,

for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—

⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

⁸ Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today's reading from the gospels: Matthew 15: 21-28

This short chapter from the gospel of Matthew embodies the message of today's Old Testament reading.

The Canaanite Woman's Faith

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' ²⁴ He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' ²⁶ He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁷ She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

For the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A reflection for the tenth Sunday after Trinity from The Venerable Alex Hughes, Archdeacon of Cambridge

To our modern ears, the most striking thing about today's Gospel reading is that Jesus comes across as rudely sexist and racist. It's important to be honest about that up front; and I will come back to it later. But first I want to draw attention to something that is not obvious, but very important; which is that it makes no sense that Matthew describes the woman in the story as a Canaanite, because the land of Canaan ceased to exist hundreds of years before he wrote. A modern equivalent would be to say that someone from England is a Saxon. So, what was Matthew thinking?

Well, we need to reach far back into biblical history to see what's going on. The reason the Canaanites no longer existed was because the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan and killed them all. According to the Book of Joshua, this genocide was actually commanded by God.

Now I don't believe for one second that God commands genocide. I find the idea completely abhorrent.

I don't know what Matthew thought about the ancient history of his people, but it is obvious from today's reading that he was telling a very different story.

As I say, Joshua led Israel to conquer the Canaan. But now, when Jesus meets a so-called Canaanite, he is the one who gets conquered. This is the only time in the whole of the Gospels that Jesus loses an argument.

And did you know that Joshua and Jesus in English are actually different transliterations of the same ancient Hebrew name?

So, what we have here is a complete reversal of the old story. Joshua conquered Canaan in the name of God. God in Jesus was conquered by a Canaanite. *And* she was a woman. *And* her family had been infected by spiritual evil.

In the patriarchal Jewish world of the ancient Near East, with its strong beliefs about religious purity and spiritual uncleanness, nothing could have been more scandalous than a male religious teacher being outdone by a foreign female pagan with a spiritually diseased family.

So, while *we* may be shocked by the way Jesus deals with the woman in the story, that was *not* what would have shocked the people of his own day.

In the culture of the ancient world, people would almost certainly have thought it was the woman, not Jesus, who had acted inappropriately. Her presence and her behaviour were quite scandalous by the standards of the day. An unaccompanied woman was not permitted to approach a man outside of her own family, especially when she was a pagan and he was

a rabbi. Her attention, as an unrelated woman, brought Jesus the risk of dishonour, and it would have been considered quite right and proper – for her sake and for his – that he did not talk to her. The spiritual defilement of her family also threatened his position as a rabbi, because contact with her might leave him ritually unclean; so again, according to the social conventions of the day, it was appropriate for him to keep his distance. So, as I say, all of the bystanders would have put the woman, not Jesus, in the wrong. But their jaws would have hit the floor when, after he had kept his social distance, she dared to pester him and even answer him back. This was a truly staggering affront to common decency and Jesus could quite reasonably have attacked her for it. And yet he did not. Instead, he yielded to her and gave her what she wanted. He even praised her publicly for her faith. Now Jesus really was behaving scandalously.

Of course it's really hard for us to get past our sense of what is socially acceptable in 21st century Britain; but we have to, otherwise we can't get to the point of this incredibly radical text, which is indeed scandalous, but not for the reasons we first think.

Several chapters earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me [who is not scandalised by me]" (Mt.11.6). And we know that again and again he did offend and scandalise people by turning what they thought they knew about God, and about how things are supposed to be, upside down and inside out. We know the stories - how he touched lepers; ate with prostitutes; hung out with petty criminals; called the religious leaders hypocrites. And today we also know that he let a spiritually contaminated foreign pagan woman get him to break umpteen social conventions to give her what she needed. It seems that Jesus could not resist a cry of need, even from the most unlikely places. There was nowhere he wouldn't go, no matter the cost to his reputation and his safety. God in Christ goes to extraordinary, scandalous, lengths to connect with people. And God in Christ will do the same for us too.

It is no accident that very often, before we come to Communion, the words of the Canaanite woman are given for us to say. Do you remember the Prayer of Humble Access?

We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy.

Amen.