

Readings for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

20th August 2023

First Reading: Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came closer. He said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there – since there are five more years of famine to come – so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty." And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.' Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Second Reading: Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Gospel: St Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.' 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.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the

dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

A Reflection for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Over the past two Sundays, having kept the Feasts of the Transfiguration and of Mary, we have taken a break from the sequence of lectionary readings, and they have, so to speak, moved on while we have been away.

Matthew's Gospel has moved from a series of parables to consider different responses to Jesus' ministry. The beginning of today's Gospel passage is a transition point as Matthew starts to address the question of who Jesus' ministry and mission is for. Just how wide is God's mercy?

At the start of this section, we are told that Jesus is now in Gentile territory – he has withdrawn to the area of Tyre and Sidon following a confrontation with the Pharisees and scribes. The woman who addresses him is described as a Canaanite, which is surprising since that term was not current at the time of Jesus. In the equivalent passage in Mark's Gospel, she is referred to as a Gentile of Syrophenician origin (Phoenicia was part of the Roman province of Syria). By referring to her as a Canaanite, Matthew appears to be harking back to ancient conflicts between the Israelites and other tribes in the area, emphasising the difference between her and the Jews.

The community that Matthew initially wrote his Gospel for are generally thought to have been predominantly Jewish. In the changed circumstances following the resurrection of Jesus and the command to make disciples of all nations at the end of the Gospel, they had cause to question their Jewish traditions, their relationship with God and with other peoples.

In this story, Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman sounds appalling to us. It is appalling, but is what a Jewish audience would have expected of a faithful rabbi. The Canaanites were ancient enemies of Israel and traditional practice required faithful Jews to limit their relationships with outsiders, so Jesus ignores her. Then his disciples get in on the act and ask him to send her away – she's getting on their nerves. He dismisses her claim – she's neither Jewish nor living in Jewish territory so not part of his mission objective, the lost sheep of Israel. Then, when she begs on her knees, he insults her. It's exactly as tradition would have required. And it's awful and it's cruel. But the tension is broken by a simple declaration of faith by the woman. She has earlier called Jesus 'Lord' and 'Son of David', titles that recognise him as Messiah; now she declares her utter dependence on God's grace and mercy. And she turns Jesus' rejection and insult to her advantage, effectively saying 'Yes, I'm a dog, so give me the crumbs'.

This story doesn't fit our image of Jesus, but that doesn't mean we should ignore it. Indeed, the fact that it shows him in a less than good light yet is still included is good reason to pay attention to it. But how are we to understand it?

One way to do so is to see it as an illustration of Jesus' faithfulness to his calling firstly to the people of Israel, rather than about his attitude to women or Gentiles in particular. For Matthew's original audience, trying to make sense of the changing situation after Jesus' resurrection and the extension of his mission to all nations, this peculiar story may have given important reassurance. It recognises that Jesus is the fulfilment of the ancient promises of a Messiah for Israel, yet also the one through whom mercy and salvation are opened up to everyone, as prophesied by Isaiah in

particular. It is this ancient hope that has drawn the Canaanite woman to Jesus, breaking all the religious traditions, practices and prejudices.

From the woman's perspective, this is a story about overcoming obstacles and crossing boundaries through persistence and faith. Her petition sounds much like the sentiments in many of the psalms: 'Have mercy on me, Lord'. Is mercy limited and rationed, reserved only for the Jews? The woman argues not – there is mercy to spare and it can spill over to others. Her faith brings healing for her daughter but also transforms her relationship with Jesus. It demands change and, as such, is in sharp contrast to the Pharisees and scribes and their determined adherence to rules and regulations that had led Jesus to call them 'hypocrites' earlier in this same chapter.

More broadly, the woman challenges Jesus for the inclusion of people like her, all who have known rejection in any form, in Jesus' saving ministry. Those who have previously been excluded become included in God's redemption. For the Jewish church, Matthew's original audience, perhaps this is to help them understand that they also should reach out beyond their traditional boundaries, that no-one is excluded.

Today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans is also concerned about inclusivity though from the opposite perspective. Much of Paul's ministry was to the Gentiles, preaching that they were co-heirs with the Jews in God's kingdom through faith. The Roman church, to whom Paul is writing, have accepted Jesus as Messiah and Saviour whilst knowing that many Jews have rejected him. Does this mean that God, in turn, has rejected the Jewish nation and moved on? This is a question that has bedevilled the church for many centuries and has been the foundation of much anti-Semitism. But Paul is quite clear: No, God has not rejected Israel – the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. God is faithful to God's promises which are grounded in his mercy to the undeserving – which includes all of us. As Paul says here, both Jews and Gentiles are disobedient to God, so sinful, and both are recipients of God's mercy.

The reading from Genesis also shows the inclusiveness of God's mercy. Moving on a generation from our earlier readings telling parts of the story of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we come to Joseph. Joseph has been sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, jealous of his father's favouritism, but has risen to position of power as a senior official. Now his brothers have come to Egypt seeking help in a time of famine. In this sorry sequence of events, Joseph sees divine providence acting through human folly and wrong actions, and he shows mercy to his brothers when he could so easily have rejected them without them even recognising him. In the background to this story, God's mercy is also shown to all the Egyptian people through Joseph's careful stewardship of resources that provided for them in the famine.

All these illustrations of the inclusivity of God's mercy, remind us that we too are recipients of that same mercy. Recognising that we have been shown mercy, we in turn are called to show mercy to others. And, like both Matthew's Jewish community and the early church in Rome, we face rapid changes in our world which call the traditions and practices of our faith into question. How do we adapt faithfully, without either guarding our traditions too fearfully or discarding them thoughtlessly, to remain inclusive of and merciful to all?