

Readings for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

16th August 2026

First Reading: Isaiah 56:1,6-8

Thus says the Lord:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come
and my deliverance be revealed.

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—

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.

Thus says the Lord God,

who gathers the outcasts of Israel:
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

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

There are times when we come to Gospel stories of Jesus' life and ministry and wonder how they can possibly fit with what we thought we knew about his kingdom values and teachings. For me, today's passage from Matthew is one such. We are familiar with Jesus getting angry at powerful figures who abused their positions and exploited others, but we expect him to be compassionate towards the poor, the marginalised and those in need, as many stories illustrate. Yet here, we have an account where, initially, he ignored a woman in need and then was abominably rude to her. Why so? It seems very out of character. When we come to such passages, we should remember that Gospel stories are rarely simply about the characters they portray but also have wider implications for Jesus' teaching and for his church.

In this passage, we are told that Jesus left the area around the Sea of Galilee, possibly to find some respite from the crowds that were following him so assiduously there, and also after some fresh disagreements with the religious authorities. He headed to the district of Tyre and Sidon with his disciples. This was Gentile territory, the Roman province of Syria-Phoenicia. The cities of Tyre and Sidon are in modern day Lebanon, some 40 miles to the north-west of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, so quite some distance.

There Jesus was accosted by a woman from that region, here described as a Canaanite woman, in Mark's equivalent passage as being of Syro-Phoenician origin. Initially she doesn't seem to have approached him but shouted at him from a distance, and appealed for mercy for herself and her daughter. She addressed Jesus as 'Lord' and 'Son of David', titles that recognised him as the Messiah.

This encounter is odd for a several reasons. Firstly, living where she did, it is unlikely that this woman would have witnessed any of Jesus' previous miracles, so it would appear that Jesus' reputation had gone before him, even into foreign territory. Secondly, she was a foreigner herself, so her use of Jewish Messianic titles is surprising, especially so since, historically, the Canaanites were bitter enemies of the Jews. And she was a woman addressing a man at a time when for a Jewish man to speak to woman in public, especially a foreign woman, was simply not done which, perhaps, makes Jesus' initial silence less surprising.

She was desperate and, in Jesus, she clearly recognised someone who had the power and authority to heal her daughter, and so she appealed to him across the divide. Yet, she was also humble; there is nothing in her approach to suggest that she thought this was something she or her daughter deserved, she simply appealed for mercy.

Jesus, conventionally, was initially silent but she did not give up, to the apparent annoyance of his disciples. Also conventionally, they asked Jesus to send this woman, this foreigner, this enemy of the Jews, away. But Jesus didn't do that, although he still seems to have followed convention at this point in his claim of exclusivity for the Jews. He rejected her claim because she was a foreigner.

Still the woman persisted. Now she came up to him and knelt before him, another demonstration of her humility, as she begged for his mercy. Yet Jesus responded rudely, implying that she was a dog – the food is for the children, the

Jews, and not for the dogs - to refer a Gentile as a dog was a well-known insult. The woman's faith was stronger than this and she tried again, ignoring the insult and turning around what Jesus had said to stake her claim on him. And finally she got what she wanted. Her faith was acknowledged and her daughter was healed.

That is the story at face value, but what are its wider meaning in Jesus' teaching and its implications for the church? There are three points I would like to touch on.

Firstly, and to my mind at the moment, the most important, is inclusivity. Let us turn to today's passage from Isaiah. In it, the prophet reminds the ancient Israelites that God is not just their God but God for all nations. God tells them that all people who follow the commandments are God's people ... even foreigners! It builds on one of the great themes of Isaiah that the Israelites are to be a light to the nations. Yet, despite this, many first century Jews did not regard the Gentiles as part of God's plan for redemption.

Similarly, in the passage from Romans, Paul reminds a Gentile audience that, although God has accepted them as part of the Christian church, it does not mean that God has rejected the Jewish people but accepts all who are obedient to God's call.

We can all feel like outsiders at times, yet we are all welcome and in turn need to remember to extend that welcome to others. More widely, in a world that seems ever more divided on ethnic and nationalistic lines, the inclusive nature of God's kingdom is an important message for all people.

Secondly is the need for humility in our approach to God. The woman in this story never asserted that she or her daughter had any entitlement to the favour she was asking, she simply asked for mercy. Humility is a characteristic all of us need to develop as we learn God's ways. None of us is deserving of God's mercy on our own merit, we can't earn it by our own efforts. God's mercy is a free gift through God's grace.

And thirdly, this story reminds us of the need for persistence in our faith and in our prayers. As we all know from experience, God does not give us everything we ask for, and God does not answer all our prayers immediately or, necessarily, as we wish. But God does promise to give us what is good and what we need, and God asks us to be persistent in coming to him, knowing that such persistence helps to build our trust and faith.

I recently came across a hymn by the modern American hymn-writer, Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, which is based on this Gospel passage:

She came to Jesus from outside the fold —
Canaanite woman! Persistent and bold!
Looking to Jesus, she wanted to see
One who would help her and set her child free.

Claiming a blessing, a touch of God's grace,
She knew God's love was not bounded by place.
Jesus, you listened, debated — then healed —
For in her asking, her faith was revealed.

God, you still bless those who seek you in prayer.

You welcome dreamers who faithfully dare.

In Christ, now risen, your mercy extends:

Those on the outside are welcomed as friends.

Copyright © 2020 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette.

(It is sung to the tune 'Slane' (Be thou my vision))

This hymn particularly illustrates the points about inclusivity and persistence. The woman comes from 'outside the fold' knowing God's grace is 'not bounded by place', that is by not limited by nationality or place of origin, and she is persistent, bold and faithful. And then, in the last verse, it speaks to the church today, reminding us that God's blessing comes to those who seek God in prayer, to those 'who faithfully dare' - who are prepared to step out of their comfort zone to follow where God leads, and that through Christ, God's mercy extends beyond the in-crowd to welcome 'those on the outside'.