

Sermon - Trinity 11

“Mercy and grace to all” (Matthew 15:21-28; Isaiah 56:1, 6-8)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

So, who belongs to the people of God? Our two readings today approach this question from different directions, but together they offer a profound answer. God's purposes are wider than human-devised boundaries, and God's grace reaches beyond the limits that some Christians try to impose.

Isaiah 56 was written in the period following the exile. The people of Judah had returned from Babylon, but the restoration they hoped for did not unfold as they expected. The community had to work out again what it meant to be God's people. And one of the issues they had to deal with was the place of foreigners within the restored community.

The opening verses of Isaiah 56 call the people to “*maintain justice, and do what is right.*” The restoration of Israel was not simply about rebuilding a nation politically and economically or even restoring religious institutions. It was about living faithfully before God.

Then comes the remarkable promise. God says that foreigners who join themselves to the Lord will be welcomed. They will be brought to God's holy mountain, and their worship will be accepted. The Lord declares, “*My house shall be called a house of prayer for **all** peoples.*” The temple, the centre of Israel's worship, is imagined as a place where outsiders are welcomed into God's presence.

This is an expansive vision. The people of God are not to be a closed community, defined by nationality, ethnicity, or religious background. God is gathering people from every direction. The final words of the passage are wonderfully embracing, “*I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.*” The God who gathered Israel gathers also the outsider.

God’s welcome is always wider than we imagine. And then we come to our gospel reading where this vision is put to the test.

Jesus has been ministering in Galilee, but he travels to the region of Tyre and Sidon that are located outside the traditional boundaries of Jewish territory. The contemporary cities of Tyre and Sidon are in today’s Lebanon. Tyre and Sidon were Gentile regions, associated with Israel's historic enemies and with pagan religion. And there, a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus.

Matthew deliberately identifies her as a Canaanite. The term is unusual in the New Testament and evokes the ancient inhabitants of the land of Canaan. In labelling the woman as Canaanite, the gospel writer is reminding his readers of the deep historical and religious hostility between Israel and the Canaanites.

The woman is an outsider on several levels – ethnically, religiously, geographically, and socially. She is a woman in a society where women had little public voice. She is a Gentile, and so is outside the religious community to which Jesus and his disciples belong.

Yet, she comes with a desperate need. Her daughter is suffering, and she cries out to Jesus, “*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.*” She addresses Jesus as “*Lord*” and “*Son of David.*” This is remarkable when we consider

that the disciples, who are Jewish, are still struggling to understand who Jesus is. But this Gentile woman, she recognises him as the Messiah of Israel. She uses a distinctly Jewish messianic title, “*Son of David*” and she is the one who demonstrates extraordinary faith.

Her faith is deeply moving. She does not come with theological arguments, but with a cry for mercy. And yet, Jesus seems to ignore her, which is perplexing. We have the description, “*But he did not answer her at all.*” The silence of Jesus is striking. The woman has spoken a confession of faith, and Jesus says nothing.

Then the disciples intervene, asking Jesus, “*Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.*” Their concern seems to be less about her suffering than about the inconvenience that her persistence is causing them.

When Jesus finally responds, he says to her that his mission is to the lost sheep of Israel. But the Canaanite woman will not accept the apparent boundary. She will not be turned away. She kneels before him and asks simply, “*Lord, help me.*”

Kneeling is a sign of recognition of kingship and power. Earlier in Jesus’ ministry, a leper had knelt before Jesus and asked to be made clean (Matt. 8:2). Jairus, a synagogue ruler, knelt and asked for his daughter’s healing (9:18). And at the end of Matthew’s gospel, when the resurrected Lord Jesus appears, the disciples bow before him, and Jesus says that all authority in heaven and earth is his (28:17-18). Bowing in worship also recalls Jesus’ command to worship only the Lord God (4:9). The Canaanite woman kneels before one whom she recognizes as having authority not only to sit on the throne of David, but also to wield power over evil.

But Jesus' response sounds harsh, *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

This is a difficult passage. We may wish that Jesus had responded differently, but perhaps Matthew is deliberately showing us something important about the struggle to understand the breadth of God's mission. There is a theme that weaves through Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' ministry is rooted in God's covenant with Israel. The Messiah comes first to God's covenant people. The mission begins with Israel, but it does not end there as Matthew's Gospel concludes with the risen Christ commanding his disciples to *"make disciples of all nations."*

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The "children" represent Israel, and the "dogs" represent Gentiles. Some interpreters have pointed out that the Greek term may refer to small pet dogs rather than the wild street dogs that roamed through settlements in those days. But we should not use this observation to render the statement harmless. The contrast remains. Jesus is articulating the traditional priority of Israel in God's saving purposes.

But the woman is not deterred and does something extraordinary. She does not reject the metaphor. She accepts it and turns it around with a riposte that is both humble and bold, *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

She does not deny Israel's place in God's purposes, and she does not demand that the children be deprived of their food. The woman sees something that others have failed to see, that there is enough! If God's

grace is truly abundant, then the inclusion of the Gentiles does not diminish Israel's blessing. There is plenty to go around.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand that involved five loaves and two fish, and after everyone had eaten, there were twelve baskets full of leftovers. The symbolism is striking. There is abundance at God's table. The woman is asking for what falls from it.

This is the only time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus explicitly praises someone as having great faith. He declares to her, "*Woman, great is your faith!*" The person he praises is a Gentile woman who seems to understand what the members of the household of Israel have yet to grasp. Jesus is not just hope for Israel but hope for the world.

Her faith is great not because she has perfect theological understanding, but because she trusts the character of Jesus. She refuses to believe that mercy has run out. She persists and her persistence exposes the narrowness of social, political and religious prejudices.

The disciples wanted her sent away. Probing, Jesus initially speaks of Israel's priority. But the woman's faith becomes the means by which the boundaries are opened. This gospel story does not simply tell us that Jesus healed a Gentile woman's daughter. It tells us something about the unfolding of God's kingdom, that although the mission of Jesus is rooted in Israel, God's mercy cannot be contained within Israel's boundaries.

And this is where Isaiah 56 helps us read Matthew 15. The Isaiah passage ends with the declaration, "*I will gather others to them besides those already*

gathered.” The Canaanite woman is one of those “*others.*” She is an outsider whom God is gathering. She is a foreigner whom Isaiah said would be welcomed to God's holy mountain. She is evidence that God's promise is becoming reality.

And there is a challenge for the Church. The temptation of religious communities is to believe that we are the gathered, while others are still outside. We might forget that we too were gathered by grace.

Christian communities can become preoccupied with deciding who is worthy, who belongs, who is orthodox enough, respectable enough, familiar enough, and who “just doesn’t seem to fit in”. But Isaiah reminds us that God is always gathering “*others.*” And Matthew gives us a disturbing and beautiful picture of someone who appears to be outside the boundaries but who, in fact, possesses remarkable faith.

The Canaanite woman also teaches us something about prayer. Her prayer is persistent because her need is real. She does not walk away when Jesus is silent. She does not feel sorry for herself when the disciples reject her. She does not give up when she encounters a theological boundary. She keeps coming.

Her prayer is not a demand that God conform to her expectations. It is a refusal to believe that God's mercy is smaller than her need. “*Lord, help me.*” That may be one of the most honest prayers we can pray. And perhaps some of us come today with that prayer. For someone we love who is suffering or struggling. For a relationship we cannot repair. For a world in which the boundaries between people, thrown up by ignorance, fear and self-centredness, seem to grow ever wider.

“Lord, help me.” The Canaanite woman reminds us that faith sometimes means simply refusing to let go of God. But the passage also asks us the question: What boundaries have we placed around God's grace?

Who are the people we assume are beyond God's reach? Who are the people we would rather send away? The movement of Scripture is clear. God gathers. He welcomes. He expands the circle. And God's grace is never exhausted by those who are already inside. The Canaanite woman came asking for crumbs, but she discovered the abundance of God's mercy.

And perhaps that is a word for us today. We are not called to guard the table as though God's grace were scarce. Rather, we are called to trust the God whose mercy is abundant. The God whose house is a house of prayer for all peoples is still widening the circle.

May we come to our God with the Canaanite woman's prayer: *“Lord, help me.”* Let us persist in faith. Let us trust in mercy. And let us continue as God's people, a community in which the outsider finds a welcome, the stranger finds a home, and all peoples discover that there is indeed a place at the table. In Christ, the table of God's grace is wider than we think, and there is room for us and for everyone. Amen.