



*Twentieth Sunday Ordinary Time 2005.*

*Isaiah 56: 1, 6-7 Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 Matthew 15:21-28*

The story of the Canaanite woman and her encounter with Jesus has important issues for Christians.

Matthew's community, as far as we know, comprised mainly Christians of Jewish birth but there were some who were born Gentile. This pattern of a mixed community is very common today.

Matthew takes a miracle story from the Markan collection and uses it to illustrate important truths.

The story becomes a dialogue between Jesus and a woman of faith. It is like overhearing a person at prayer. The woman has a request of Jesus, her daughter is ill. She describes it as being cruelly tormented by a demon.

Jesus is silent. The disciples are embarrassed. Jesus having ignored the woman speaks to the disciples.

"I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

This is Jesus' mission statement.

The woman repeats her request. Jesus answers by repeating his stance through the image of throwing the children's food to animals. This image makes his position and understanding of his mission crystal clear. That should have been the end of it. The God of Israel is pledged in covenant to the Jews. In 10:5 as Jesus is sending out the disciples we read, "Do not go among the Gentiles..." The people of Israel take precedence at the banquet of God's kingdom.

Let us go to the passage from Isaiah set for today. As is often the case it is truncated so it is necessary to go to the Bible and read chapter 56. "and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...them I will bring to my holy mountain." and "For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

This universalism which is to be read in Third Isaiah was not everyone's understanding. In the prophet Zechariah 8:7 we read, "I will rescue my people from the land of the rising sun and the land of the setting sun. I will bring them back to dwell within Jerusalem. They shall be my people, and I will be their God, with faithfulness and justice."

To return to the story; the woman does not leave, but uses Jesus' colourful imagery to confound him. In ordinary households pets are always to be found near the table. Quite often their persistence is rewarded by getting not only scraps but titbits.

I'm sure Jesus laughed at being so nicely caught. "O woman, great is your faith. Let it be done to you according to your will."

If we read the passage from Romans we gain another insight into this most important issue of the relationship between Jews and Christians. Again the most important pieces are the two images Paul uses, the dough and the grafted branch. If part of the dough is holy the whole loaf is holy. If the roots of the tree are holy then the branches are holy.

If we are true to who we are as a biblical people, then we must acknowledge ourselves as a wild branch grafted to the root stock of Israel. Christians share in the relationship of Israel with God through Jesus. The Canaanite woman, through faith in Jesus, typifies this relationship.

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