

SERMON : 11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 2020 (*Matthew 15:21-28*)

MAY the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. <Amen>

Our Gospel text for today speaks directly to the “us” and “them” mentality that often rears its ugly head in our human world.

It has always been easy to ‘draw a circle’ so that some are inside and others are out. It may be people of a different race or ethnic origin, different gender or gender orientation, age, educational background or ability. It is easy to look at the man with tattoos or the woman with many piercings, the man who stutters or the woman who didn’t make it through high school and say that this person is just not like us.

Today, we find Jesus out of the land of Israel and gone into the region of Tyre and Sidon ... Gentile territory!

Then a woman from the area comes to Jesus - Matthew uses the word “Canaanite” rather than “Syro-Phoenician.” This term is heavily “loaded” for Jewish people because Canaanites were the pagan people with whom the Israelites had fought for centuries. The Canaanites were idol worshippers and opponents of the one true God.

This Canaanite woman who came to Jesus, came alone without a husband or son or father. And she came shouting loudly, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.”

So, from the beginning - this woman has “three strikes” against her:

- she was not Jewish (strike one!),
- she was a woman who spoke to a man without a male intermediary (strike two!),
- she was a pest, whose screaming and shouting behaviour would not endear her to Jesus and His followers. Indeed the disciples came and urged Jesus, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us.” (strike three!)

‘The circle’ is clearly drawn - Jesus and the disciples and Jewish men are inside. This bothersome, Canaanite woman is outside. “Us” and “them”.

What I find very interesting is how much a ‘man of His time and place’ Jesus was. Jesus agreed, so it seems, with the disciples. He tried to brush the woman off. His mission was to Israel only. Yes, she had confessed him Lord and Messiah, something many in Israel would not confess. Yes, she asked him for mercy and knelt down before him in a posture of supplication and worship. Yes, She had faith that Jesus could heal her daughter of a tormenting demon. What did Jesus do when she would not go away? He calls her a dog!

The Jews called the Gentiles “dogs” - a term of insult and derision.

But the woman uses the same phrase back to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

There you have it ... with that one phrase ... she broke the circle and entered in.

Salvation came to her and her possessed daughter not because she became Jewish or promised to keep the Law of Moses. But here in Matthew's Gospel she finds salvation through faith in Jesus alone. She acknowledges Jesus as Lord and Master.

Jesus responds, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done to you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

When we look into the Bible, there are few people who specifically acquired the praise of Jesus Christ ... this Canaanite woman is one!

The great Good News is not just for men, for Jews, for people who conform to our expectations of them. It took the church a long time to realise this. The first great controversy in the Christian Church was whether Gentiles had to become Jews before they could become Christians.

Christ reveals that NO PERSON is to be called common or unclean and so it was that at the Council of Jerusalem (about AD50) it was agreed that Gentiles could become Christians. Meanwhile ... in my own lifetime ... I remember when the first woman priest and the first woman bishop were ordained. I remember when a divorced person could not remarry in church. I remember when same-sex couples could not have their union blessed in church.

The God of my understanding leads me to believe that being a woman and wanting to be a priest is not a sin; divorce is not an unforgivable sin; being gay or lesbian is not an unforgivable sin.

Your opinions on these matters may very well differ from mine ... BUT ... the world needs to remember ... we are all sinners.

Scripture tells me "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

Paul, writing to the young church in Rome puts it so wonderfully when he declares that Jews and Gentiles are both sinners and invited to be God's people through faith in Jesus.

Like the Canaanite woman, we are not saved by our gender or our status, our race or educational level, by our orientation or our good behaviour. We do not find our self worth in what others may think of us but in being children of God and heirs to God's Kingdom through faith in Christ alone.

What our Gospel text, the Canaanite woman, clearly says is that we are saved by faith in Jesus alone - - - irrespective of who we are.

God's good news is for all people not just some.

Christ died for all not just some.

Forgiveness is for all not just some.

The only condition is faith which is itself a gift of God.

Yes, we are human beings, full of faults and 'fallen'.

Remember, the disciples were not God. Remember that neither the church nor the Vicar nor The Lay Ministers nor The vestry is God either. All just human and frail.

YET ...

Our God is faithful and loving even when we, God's servants, may not be.

Our God draws the circle wide enough to bring everyone in.

Never let anyone or anything try to keep you outside the circle that is God's love in Jesus Christ.

I runga e te Ingoa o te Atua, te Matua, te Tama me te Wairua Tapu.
In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit <AMINE>