

Reflection for Sunday 16th June (10th Sunday after Trinity)

Gospel reading for the day:

Matthew 15.10-28

Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean', but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'."

Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

Peter said, "Explain the parable to us."

"Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean'."

Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.

He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Reflection.

Sometimes when I look at the lectionary readings for a Sunday, I wonder why the people who compiled the lectionary put certain readings together.

This week it might not be immediately obvious why Matthew chose to put these two apparently separate stories side by side.

But it occurred to me that these two episodes about what makes a person unclean and about the faith of the Canaanite woman are both about insiders and outsiders.

Just before this passage, Matthew tells us about Jesus having a run in with the Pharisees who complained about his disciples not keeping the letter of the Jewish law.

In the first half of our reading Jesus is challenging the people who see themselves as the 'insiders'. They are the people who feel that their ticket to heaven is booked.

Born as part of God's chosen people.
They don't eat unclean foods like pork.
They study the religious law.
'Sorted' – ticket to heaven booked.

Sadly there are Christians today who think in similar ways.
They consider themselves born again.
They've been baptised and maybe confirmed as well.
They go to church.
'Sorted' – ticket to heaven booked.

Jesus challenges such a complacent way of thinking about God. What matters is what's in the heart. The appearance on the outside may be good but if the heart is full of selfishness or any of the list that Jesus gives us, then we're not as close to God as we might like to think.

Then there is the story of the Canaanite woman. She is definitely an outsider. She's not Jewish and, as a woman, she was definitely on the wrong side of the social norm approaching a group of men who were a strangers to her.

Initially Jesus seems incredibly rude to her. I don't have a good explanation for the harshness of his words. Of course, we look at them through the glasses of our 21st century culture. In Jesus time children were considered like goods and chattels and were not so much higher in the scale of importance, than the animals that a person owned. Maybe Jesus was being extreme to make the point that this woman is definitely not the kind of insider that the Pharisees thought they were.

When Thomas Cranmer wrote the Church of England prayer book, he picked up this woman's words and we use them still today in our Holy Communion services.

*We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.....*

The Canaanite woman's heart is filled with faith and Jesus responds by giving her the miraculous healing she asks for her daughter. The outsider is really an insider when it comes to God.

A friend of mine once stood up to preach a sermon with his jacket on inside out. The congregation started to laugh. He asked what was wrong, so someone told him that his jacket was inside out. 'No it's not' he said.

The children called out, 'Yes it is'.
'No it's not. It's outside in.'

His point was that the church is the place where the outsiders come in.

Our society is filled with people who, deep down, see themselves as outsiders as far as God is concerned. Yet Jesus' message is about bringing the outsiders in.

It's the same message that the prophet Isaiah wrote about and that Jesus quoted right at the beginning of his ministry. (Isaiah 61:1-2, see also Luke 4:16-21).

If you feel that you are an outsider as far as God is concerned, be encouraged. If your heart says you want to be closer to him. Jesus knows that you are more of an insider than you might think. And he himself is the one who will draw you closer to God.

But Jesus has work to be done by all the outsiders who come in. We have to continue to fulfil that prophecy of Isaiah. To proclaim the good news. To let people know that God loves outsiders so much that Jesus died and rose again for them.

I only read the first verse of Isaiah 61 but I commend the whole chapter to you. It's filled with beautiful words about God's intention to redeem and restore a world that is full of brokenness. That redemption began with Jesus ministry, with his death on the cross and his resurrection and it will be completed when he comes again.

That is the good news he wants all us outsiders to know.

Jonathan.