

Sunday 20 August – Peter Brady

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer.

It's a quirk of the Lectionary that today and last week's Gospel readings have also appeared in the weekday readings within the last fortnight or so. If you haven't had the opportunity to do so, I'd suggest you read Cheryl Courtice's reflections on today's reading from two weeks ago. Although I have to admit that, having mistakenly thought today's reading was Peter's declaration of Jesus as messiah, that I wasn't quite as pleased as she was to find out I was reflecting on the story of the Caananite woman.

I wholeheartedly agree with Cheryl though that this is a confusing passage. The Jesus it portrays is aloof and reluctant, not the kind, caring person described throughout the Gospels and it's not until the night of his betrayal that we see similar unusual behaviour from Jesus. It is the only story in any of the Gospels (noting that the story is repeated in Mark) where someone has to justify themselves to Jesus to receive his healing. Because this happens to a gentile, and a woman, some view this as sexist and racist behaviour by Jesus until the woman bests him in debate. The opposing view is that Jesus always intended to grant the woman's request and merely engaged in playful banter to provide her with the opportunity to demonstrate her faith. Many of the sermons about this passage that I read online emphasise the persistent faith of the woman and present it as something we should emulate. This is a worthy message but perhaps not Matthew's primary objective in recounting the story.

Matthew's Gospel was written for an audience with strong roots in Judaism, for instance he doesn't explain Jewish customs because his audience is familiar with them. Matthew does, however, emphasise that Jesus is the Messiah and that in him all the prophecies of the Old Testament are fulfilled. He (Matthew) is trying to convince the rest of Israel of this. He is also aiming to convince his audience that the growth of the church amongst gentiles is not a bad thing. Many of Matthew's stories, like today's, demonstrate the fundamental differences separating Jews and gentiles is overcome by faith. Membership of the 'true Israel' is open to all, regardless of ethnicity, cultural origins or social status. Knowing Matthew's own story, it is not surprising he would hold this view. While a Jew, because he was a tax collector, Jewish society would have viewed him as having renounced his birthright as a descendant of Abraham and no longer viewed him as a member of the community.

In trying to understand today's reading we may do Matthew a disservice by not reading the first 20 verses of Chapter 15. In those passages Jesus chastises Israel's religious leaders for having become so subservient to their human-inspired laws, traditions and view of what God should look like that they have not only forgotten what God really wants them to but, in their error, they lead the rest of Israel astray. He then has to chastise the disciples themselves for their lack of understanding of his teachings.

Then we meet the Caananite woman who, by comparison with 'blind' Israel, the Caananite woman immediately grasps who Jesus is. She even refers to him as 'Son of David' which, according to Bishop Charles Ellicott, was the most popular of all the names of the expected messiah. In the historical context the woman's behaviour is unimaginable, if not ridiculous. But Matthew is making the point that it is a gentile, and a despised Caananite at that, who accepts who Jesus is when Israel, including Jesus' own followers, the otherwise chosen ones, have not. The woman understands that Jesus gives

and heals; she understands and exemplifies what faith is rather than an empty nod to tradition or an expectation that humans can shape what God should look like. She is an exemplar of a true member of the Kingdom of God. Matthew is saying that faith is faith and should be acknowledged as such, regardless of where it might be found.

Paul's letter to the Romans continues presents a similar message. Writing to a gentile audience, Paul does not need to tell them their faith is valid. But to get his message across he too uses an analogy that, for his letter's original audience, is equally ridiculous. While you can indeed graft branches from a wild olive tree onto a cultivated one, their characteristics and fruit are so different to render the exercise pointless.

Paul agrees that the church in Rome is gentile in origin but he stresses that because its members have come to Christ through faith they are as worthy as believers from the Jewish community. Through their faith, like the Caananite woman, they have come to a share in Kingdom. But, Paul warns them, they do not have special status in the Kingdom. They are the same as the other branches; all are equal. To emphasise this point, Paul observes that they have not usurped the first branches, the Jewish community, from God's care and love. If they overcome their unbelief there is room for them too. Similarly, if the Romans fall in their belief they will be subject to the same judgement as those who first heard the message but did not believe. Faith is the key.

Today's first reading about Joseph revealing himself to his brothers is rightly interpreted as about forgiveness. But, there's also an element of faith in the story. Joseph is a bit of an anti-hero to be sure. As a youngster he's a bit of a brat. And as an adult he seems a bit too smug. But he paid for all that and was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery and become a prisoner in a strange land. He would have some grounds for complaint. Yet, he never wavered in his faith that God had a plan for him and it was this faith that sustained him during all that happened to him.

What then is the message we can take from these passages, written in – but not necessarily for – a different time and place? First, that the faith and persistent trust demonstrated by the woman, Joseph, the first Christians in Rome, and even St Paul himself, is good. At various times all of them encountered difficult times. But they did not give up, rather they persisted in the belief that God would be there for them. And He was. There may be times when we feel that God is not there for us, but He is. He hears all our prayers. We may not think He answers but the fault lies with us in not hearing correctly. God's plan may not, probably is not, what we would choose but we need to make the effort to hear Him through the silence and understand what He has planned rather than assuming we know what the plan should be and trying to make God fit into narrow human thinking.

The second message from today's readings is that faith can be found where it is least expected. No-one would have expected the level of faith shown by the woman or by a group of non-Jews in the centre of the Roman Empire. Yet they were there, expressing a level of faith that surpassed those who considered themselves to be God's chosen. How many times have we dismissed somebody, and their faith, because of a preconceived notion we are right or worthier than them.

Which brings us to the final message from today's readings; faith does not require worthiness. The woman was not worthy, Joseph was not worthy and the believers in Rome were not worthy. Paul in particular knew he was not worthy. But faith doesn't require us to be worthy. Nor does it make us worthy – the point Paul was making in his letter. By the same token, faith isn't stopped by our unworthiness either. What it does though, is make us turn to the only one who can make us worthy. It is through this grace, the gift of God's love given to all through Jesus the Son. Faith relies on God,

nothing more and nothing less. This remains as true today as it did for Joseph, all the other figures in the Old Testament, for the Caananite woman, for St Paul and for the early Church.