

If we ever needed to pay careful consideration to the Sunday readings, it is now. For once they all seem to be saying the same thing. All four of them - OT, Ps, NT and Gospel point in the same direction; they point to inclusivity, the inclusivity of God. 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all people'. 'You guide all the nations upon earth'. God will be merciful to all'. And 'Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish'. The inclusivity of God - a message which we need to hear and learn when the world seems to be tearing itself apart with religious, ethnic, racial, gender and political divisions.

In the Letter to the Romans - a mainly Gentile congregation - Paul tells the Christians of Rome that they are not superior to the non-believing Jews of Israel. Their unbelief has, paradoxically, made a breathing space in the working out of the new covenant, and in that breathing space Gentiles can come into the new Israel. The original relationship between God and the Jewish people has not been changed or abandoned - 'For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable', he writes. God still yearns for his people as a Father yearns for his son - the parable of the Prodigal Son springs to mind. This is the consequence - the Gentiles were outside the covenant, then the Jewish people in the majority rejected the Gospel, and that created, as Paul saw it, this space for the Gentiles to come in. Now, however, with

gentiles receiving mercy, the Jewish people, Paul believes, will become jealous of them and so turn away from unbelief and receive the mercy and blessing which the Gentiles have received. 'They too may receive mercy', he writes. This is not a wish for some future date - but is for now. And in order for the mercy gained to be available for all as a gift of grace rather than a privilege or a right by inheritance, as some Jews might have thought - 'we are all descended from Abraham' - it was necessary for all people, Jews as well as Gentiles, to be shut up in a prison called 'disobedience'. Only in this way can grace be grace and mercy be mercy - as opposed to reward - and then made available for all. That is the big picture of the plan of God which Paul has laid out for us in his letter to the Christians in Rome. We know that the church in Rome was mainly gentile because Emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome in the late 40s, and when he died in 54AD Nero became Emperor and the Jews began to return. It was about this time that Paul was writing. What was the church to do? Keep its nose in the air and have nothing to do with them? Refuse to share the Good News? Far from it. Paul has come, as it were, into a land where there is much food to be had, and he wants his fellow Jews to be fed. There can be no 'us and them' - no divisions in God's family. And it is a rejection of 'us and them' which the writer of our OT reading puts at the heart of the oracle from the Prophecy of Isaiah we have today. 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people'.

God has called the Jewish people to be the means by which his love and mercy can be made known to all, but they have built a wall around themselves, founded on obedience to the letter of the Law, rites of purity and observance of the Sabbath. In Mark's Gospel Jesus quotes this passage from Isaiah when he drives the traders out of the Temple. In spite of their scriptures, the attitude is very much 'us and them'; they are not interested in 'all people'.

And 'us and them' is a very comfortable place to be - 'us and them' when it comes to people; 'either / or' when it comes to ideas or fondly held beliefs. It usually amounts to 'I know I am right - you hold a different view, therefore you are wrong'. It is like those old American films of the winning of the West - you draw your wagons into a circle around what you can be sure of and what you think you can control as a form of defence. Or you think you are in the driver's seat, navigating on safe, sure roads which take you only where you have already been - because the new is scary. Everything is ordered and unchangeable. But look at Jesus. Jesus experiences his Father in disorder and imperfection - he finds God in the sick, in the disabled, in the unclean, in the foreigner, in the rejected and the alienated. He is so counter-cultural - for Jesus there is no 'us and them', except - except for the religiously scrupulous, whom he calls 'you hypocrites'.

So here, in today's Gospel reading, we see him in a foreign land and in an encounter with not only a foreigner - 'them' - but also a woman -

definitely 'them'. There are societies even today where that is still the case - women are there to cook meals, wash clothes, grow vegetable and bear children - and do as they are told. The fact that the GDP of developing countries is directly related to women's literacy rates seems to have escaped the attention of their fathers, husbands, sons. So, the Gospel reading. Matthew's Gospel is usually described as the most Jewish of the Synoptics, and he does have other passages which imply that Jesus' ministry was exclusively for Israel - although some of his final words have Jesus telling his followers to make disciples of all nations.

The mother in this story has a symbolic as well as a real status. The universal care of a parent for offspring overcomes any boundary set by ethnicity or culture - it points directly to the nature of being human - and therefore being made in the image of God. And this woman is not only driven by her love for her daughter, but, miraculously it seems that in her desperation, she receives the gift of faith which ensures her plight is answered.

At first it seems that Jesus will resist the woman's plea. He says he has been sent 'only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. But it is impossible not to be moved by the woman's humility and obstinacy. She clearly already knows something about this foreigner walking through her country - note, Jesus is the foreigner here. She calls him 'Son of David' and 'Lord'. And she shouts after him so much that the disciples

beg him to send her away - but he doesn't do that. Perhaps he is trying to teach the disciples a lesson about inclusivity. And when he talks about the children and the dogs she turns his argument around - perhaps the children don't want the food and the dogs would be grateful for it - and Jesus presents her to his disciples as an example of faith, a model to believers, especially to those who look with contempt at people who do not share their religious opinions.

In the light of the religious bigotry which fills our newspapers and TV screens at the moment, today's readings invite a response of generosity and an acknowledgement that God's power and love is not inhibited by human concerns and barriers but is accessible to all who seek it - even if they express their faith in a way that differs from mine, or yours.