

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Many of us have been appalled this week by the intolerance shown towards others who are different from them. Senator Pauline Hanson and President Donald Trump have been roundly criticised by what they have done and said this week. It is so easy to see what divides us and to overlook what we share in common. In the time of Jesus there was a very clear distinction between Israelites and non-Israelites, between Jewish people and their pagan neighbours. There was a line there that neither could cross. Today's gospel takes us to the border area between Israel and its neighbours. Jesus approached and may have crossed the north western physical border of Israel but he was not willing to reach out to those non-Jewish people across the border until he was forced to do so.

A Canaanite woman came to him shouting, "Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil." Her very way of addressing Jesus is a great act of faith in him. But he ignores her. She is not put off by his rejection. He explains to his disciples that his mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel. When the woman comes up to him and kneels at his feet and cries out, "Lord help me." we can hardly believe what Jesus says to her. "It is not fair to take the

children's food and throw it to the house dogs." But even that does not put the woman off. With wit and persistence, she comes back at him to tell him that surely a puppy under the table can eat the scraps that fall from that table when the children are too clumsy to eat what they have been given.

Jesus recognises and affirms the woman's great faith. He assures her that her prayer will be answered. Matthew tells us, "And from that moment her daughter was well again."

It is a remarkable moment in the gospel. Jesus is forced by this woman of faith to admit that his ministry can go beyond the people of Israel. This woman represents all those non-Jewish people who will come to faith in Jesus because of the work of the Church. As we will see at the end of the gospel of Matthew Jesus sends his disciples out to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel to all of creation. But the reality was that for Jesus himself, his ministry was very limited by time and by space. Jesus himself remains faithful to the Biblical understanding of how God brings salvation to people. God chose Israel to be his own. And it is only through the people of Israel that others would share in the gift of salvation.

We have an expression of that in our reading today from the latter part of the Book of Isaiah. “Foreigners who have attached themselves to the Lord to serve him and to love his name and be his servants – all who observe the sabbath, not profaning it, and cling to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain. I will bring them to my house of prayer, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.” While God had a plan for all people to come to know him and worship him, the people of Israel believed that God would use them to bring about his plan. It is important for us to remember that our claim on the salvation of God comes from our association with Jesus. And Jesus was a member of the people of Israel.

This Canaanite woman in today’s gospel can represent all of us who come from a non-Jewish background and have come to faith in Jesus. She can represent also all those people in our world today who are searching for God. She can represent all those who still do not know Jesus but are searching for the truth that will give meaning to their lives. We talk about how secular our society is now. We lament that God does not seem to be important in the lives of many people. But we can still be surprised by the generosity of people. We can be edified by the way that many people offer their service to others. We can rejoice that most people

search for what is right and have a keen sense of justice. Many younger people demonstrate this very clearly. As people of faith we can recognise that God is in all of that. We can celebrate those God moments in the lives of those around us that perhaps the people around us themselves cannot see.

Today’s gospel can challenge us to revalue what we have as Catholics who are part of this community of faith. We are given so many opportunities to come together to hear God’s word to us, to be nourished by Jesus present in the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist and to grow in faith in the God who loves us. We are given many opportunities to deepen our faith by spending time in prayer and reflection. Do we value those opportunities? Do we look forward to the Eucharist as a time to be nourished by the Lord and to grow in our love for Him? Do we pray that our faith will grow ever deeper and influence all that we do?

Today’s gospel also challenges us to respect the faith journeys that others are making. We are challenged to look for the signs of God’s presence in the lives of others and to rejoice in whatever we can see. Today’s gospel helps us to remember again that God works beyond any boundaries that we may wish to place upon God. For God, no one is a stranger or a foreigner.