

Reflection for 16th August (Trinity 11) Matthew 15:21-28

The Gospel according to St Matthew has a good deal to say about openness to outsiders. It starts with some Gentiles, the magi, seeing a star in the east and travelling a long way to witness the birth of the one who was to be "the King of the Jews". It ends with the risen Christ commissioning his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations". And in between it has stories like the one we have today – the story of Jesus meeting a Canaanite woman, someone who was worthless in the eyes of religious Jews, and yet granting her request.

We can never underestimate the battle that went on in the early church about who should be included or excluded. All of us are only able to be Christians because the Holy Spirit refused to be confined to one race and moved in the minds and hearts of those first followers of Jesus so that the faith became universal. St Paul, above all people, wrestled with the challenge of this question. He knew the great privilege of being "an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham", but he also knew what the mercy of God was all about – that all peoples lived under the grace of God and had access to his love.

Once we have glimpsed the wonder of this inclusive God, we cannot remain complacent: our compassion will continually be put to the test. Sometimes Christians can be taken aback by people who are completely outside the Church; sometimes it takes a piercing comment from an outsider to make us see the truth about ourselves. Sometimes a *child's* perception can go straight to the heart of the subject when clever intellectuals have spent hours playing with words. This sort of thing happens all the time in the Bible: God calls ordinary people to speak to kings and princes; he chooses the weak to confound the mighty; he raises up leaders from people who live on the margins of society.

So we have no grounds for seeing ourselves as somehow superior in wisdom. We have been privileged to catch a glimpse of God's purposes in Christ, but nothing is merited or deserved. We all live under the grace of God. If the Church makes rules which exclude people on grounds of gender or race, then sooner or later someone is going to be called by God to say something which will shock and astound us, and open our eyes afresh to the true breadth of the gospel. God's eternal wish is that all peoples will know that they belong to him. The vision granted to the prophet Isaiah remains the same: "for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Bob Whittle