



Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 16 August 2020

READINGS

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 Psalm 67 Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 Matthew 15: 21-28

Embracing the outsider

I am often struck by the lessons we learn as we journey deeper into God's realm or kingdom. As we learn more about God, we often find that the answers to the questions we have, don't necessarily get clearer, but rather we discover new depth and nuance, even contradiction. Some parts of Scripture comfort us, and others make us feel deeply uncomfortable.

This perhaps, is as a result of the dissonance between our understanding of faith and the practice thereof. In faith we believe in the infinite goodness and love of God for all human beings but in our everyday relationships with one another, we find ourselves putting barriers which define who is in and who is out - based on nationality, race, culture & religion.

During this month of compassion we draw our attention to those who are vulnerable. As we celebrated Women's Day last Sunday and lamented the sad reality of abuse and gender-based violence, this Sunday we are challenged to turn our eyes towards another sector of society that is just as vulnerable: immigrants, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Today's readings do not let us off the hook: The message is clear: In the Kingdom of God we will find all kinds of unlikely and unexpected people. The gospel is meant to be good news for all, in every time and place and finds new expressions in different cultures, nationalities, races and religions.

This passage from the Book of the prophet Isaiah is a wonderful text that explores the desire of God to include all people, to make God's house a house of prayer for all people (v. 7), and to gather the outcasts of Israel (v. 8). During the time that Isaiah prophesied, foreigners were excluded from the temple as they were regarded as ritually impure and only Jews were able to enter the inner courts to take part in worship. As a result, they had a particular narrative about themselves, too. They had centuries and centuries of understanding themselves as being the "Chosen people of God." And other groups were clearly inferior and had no right to belong.

It is into this situation that Isaiah speaks with longing for a day when anyone who joins with the Lord was to be fully welcomed into the temple and able to take part in prayer and sacrifices. (V.8) *Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.*

Like the people of the Old Testament, we Christians are often more interested in protecting ourselves from outside influences than in sharing what we know about our inclusive God. We jealously hold on to God as our protector - very often, against those we regard as outsiders and foreigners and view them as hostile forces. If everybody is welcome in the Kingdom of God, then we must not be putting barriers in the way of any group or person coming to know God for themselves. How do we make sure that the Church is a house of prayer for everyone and that our country is a home for all who live in it?

Sadly, we have mastered discriminatory practices that exclude and exploit foreigners, immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. We build walls to keep others out. We use derogatory terms in our everyday language to perpetuate prejudice and discrimination. We've heard it elsewhere proclaimed: "we are taking our country back" or "why don't they go back to their countries?" and here at home, the rhetoric has been "they are taking our jobs". And the fear is that we don't have enough. And with fear, often comes pain.

Sometimes, even when we strive to include and welcome new people into our communities and our places of worship, it is often on our own terms, by creating standards of behaviour that disregard the diversity of culture, language and race. The Jews and the Gentiles grappled with this issue and we need to do the same.

Our Gospel passage from Matthew 15 addresses the conflict and struggle in meeting the outsider, the foreigner. Jesus and his disciples have walked out of Jewish lands and all the way into Gentile or foreign territory. As you can imagine, there must have been a lot of excitement about him among the Gentiles, too, not least because they know that he can heal people. A Canaanite woman, a non-Jew, asks for help. She kneels down and says, *"Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David, my daughter is deranged."* Jesus and his disciples first dismiss her. They brush her off. In first brushing off the woman and dismissing her, Jesus reveals some of the prejudice that existed at the time.

From their point of view, she's just a woman, she isn't even Jewish, and she doesn't look like an important person - even among the Gentiles. So, from their perspective, They see her as "the other." They see her as "less than."

So they want Jesus to get rid of her.

As she presses him further, in reply, Jesus says to her one of the most insulting things one could ever say to anyone: “it is not right to take the bread of the children and give it to the dogs.” And she retorts with equal cheekiness: “even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters,” . And Jesus loves her for her persistence and audacity. “Great is your faith!” he says to her in praise and he cured her daughter instantly.

And here in this encounter, Jesus restores the nameless woman, the insignificant foreigner her proper identity as a child of God and a fellow inheritor of the Kingdom of God.

So, what prejudicial lenses do you use to look at others who may be different from you in culture, nationality, religion or race? How do we become seeds of new life to those who are undervalued, excluded and displaced?

You and I, what are we going to do differently to help someone feel welcome and included here in our community, in our country? The prophet Micah (6:8) has a simple suggestion: act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.