

## **TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

*Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28*

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all.

His disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

### **REFLECTION 1: A DOGGED SPIRIT**

I was a goalie on a soccer team in the 1940s. All I can now remember is that I let in more goals than I saved! One of the outstanding features of the recent World Cup was the superb skill displayed by the goalkeepers. But Bob Wieland, a man who lost his legs in a landmine explosion, dwarfs their prowess. He completed the 26-mile New York City Marathon on his hands. It took him five days, but he did it. Bob's dogged spirit reflects the woman's dogged spirit in the Gospel for today. In both cases it paid off dramatically.

This Canaanite woman was not of the house of Israel to which Jesus said he was sent. Instead she was an outsider, a foreigner and a gentile – and yet persistence won healing for her daughter. This mother became the voice who spoke out on behalf of her defenseless child. Despite her seemingly overwhelming odds she made her case before Jesus and received the healing she desired for her daughter. Her relentless love, coupled with an unshakeable faith, formed a welcome within which Jesus could act on her behalf. She got the better of Jesus simply because she would not give up. The encounter between Jesus and this needy woman brings home to us the all-inclusive character of God's saving concern for us – no hint of anybody being excluded. God pays no heed to gender, age, race, nationality or grounds of eligibility.

The relentless love of God is also well illustrated in today's first reading from Isaiah (Is 56: 1, 6-7). For a narrow, enclosed, select society it must have been disconcerting to hear of foreigners joining themselves to the Lord and becoming God's servants. Shocking also must have been the very idea of God accepting the sacrifices and prayers of 'outsiders'. Only gradually would the Israelites and the disciples of Jesus learn of the relentless inclusive love of God. God spares no cost in caring for all the children of this earth – gender doesn't matter, race doesn't count and age is of no consequence. Even God's most sinful children are doted upon and loved and if that is God's plan and God's manner of ministry how can we as 'church' follow any other path? How do we welcome the stranger, the traveller, the foreigner, do we talk of 'undocumented immigrants'; illegal aliens? We should allow Jesus' and Isaiah's stories to surprise us. Like a mother given over to securing the well being of her children, God spares no cost in caring for all the children of the earth.

### **REFLECTION 2: BUILD BRIDGES, NOT WALLS**

In a tale told by Oscar Wilde, a giant was distressed by the fact that a group of children had taken to playing in his garden – a large and flowery place carpeted with plush green grass. But the giant did not appreciate their presence. So, in a tale that is very relevant in today's world, the giant built a high wall around his garden and put up a sign that read 'Trespassers will be prosecuted'. As time passed, and as the seasons

changed, it was always winter in the giant's garden, birds didn't sing there anymore, no leaves came on the trees, only the north wind blew. The only thing the wall accomplished was to keep out every source of joy and assure the giant of his solitary sadness. To learn the surprising end to the story google 'The Selfish Giant' by Oscar Wilde. I mention this brief introduction because it sets a good backdrop against which to consider today's readings which involve examples of racial and religious discrimination.

Take the first reading from Isaiah for instance, the Hebrews have finally returned from exile in Babylon only to find Gentiles (non-Jews) living in their beloved homeland. These 'foreigners' have been resettled in Palestine during the years of exile, resulting in a racially and religiously mixed culture. Isaiah imagines the possibility of Gentile sacrifices being acceptable to the God of Israel. In the letter to the Romans, Paul is troubled over the Jews' rejection of Jesus as he knows that the promised Messiah has come for Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul grieves that the realisation of God's inclusive love is being thwarted by his own people.

Then in today's Gospel (Matt 15: 21-28) Jesus has travelled beyond the boundaries of Jewish life into a Gentile area. A Gentile woman comes to him, calling him 'Son of David' and pleading with him to help her daughter. Jesus' disciples encourage him to turn her away, but after demonstrating the typical Jewish prejudice against Gentiles, he commends her faith and heals her daughter.

Here are three examples of the sad reality of discrimination. The fact is that we have never fully accepted God's inclusive love – from childhood we retain our need to be Number One. Sibling rivalry is a classic example of the need to be, not only loved, but exclusively loved. As adults we do not lose these feelings entirely and unfortunately we often transfer this infantile insecurity to our relationship with God. To discover God's unconditional love is wonderful, but to experience God's mercy is transforming. We never entirely lose our desire to be somehow closer to God, or closer to the truth, than someone else. We may therefore think of people of other religions, or, with unusual values, as living outside God's love and care.

According to biblical witness, God sees a world without religious conflicts, without racial prejudice, without hatred and discrimination. The most sublime hope imaginable and the recurring hope of the scriptures, is that God's children and all peoples, will one day live in perfect harmony and true peace. Jews and Gentiles will worship God together, Christians and Jews will gather around the throne of God, human boundaries, all walls and fences will be no more.