

God's Inclusiveness. Matthew 15:21-28

The school environment can be a cruel place at times, can't it? When our daughter Bethany started high school, she travelled by train. She enjoyed school, but the train trip was hell. The other students would point at her and giggle; they'd call her names like spastic and moron, and they'd exclude her from their fun and conversations. They made her feel worthless. She often arrived home in tears. In the end, we had to take her out of that school, because of the victimisation she experienced from other students on the train.

To exclude someone is an expression of prejudice. It is painful and unjust and contrary to the very heart of God.

In Jesus' day such prejudice was woven into the fabric of the Jews' thinking. They saw themselves as God's chosen people. This was true, but this sense of identity had been so twisted and warped, that not only did the Jews see themselves as chosen by God, but superior to all other races. More than that, they saw all other nations as unclean, and unworthy of God's love or attention.

This was a far cry from the brief the Israelites were given in Exodus 19, where they were told that they were to be God's treasured possession among the nations, AND they were to be a kingdom of priests to the surrounding nations. They were to be channels of God's blessing to the nations, and a bridge, bringing them to God. The 'priesthood of all believers' which we read about in 1 Peter actually begins here in the Old Testament.

me to our Gospel reading today. It can be a jarring passage, because at first glance, it seems that Jesus has absorbed this ungodly prejudice against the Gentiles. Let's have a look at it.

Just prior to this incident, Jesus had locked horns with the legalistic Pharisees, and perhaps to get away from them, he was heading west toward the region of Tyre and Sidon, which was a non-Jewish or Gentile area. This wasn't the way he would normally go, but he went there to provide an opportunity for the people of that region to hear and respond to his words. However, it did create some tension!

In [v22](#) we read that a Gentile woman from Canaan came to meet him. Her daughter was cruelly afflicted by an evil spirit. Desperate, she cried out for his help, addressing Jesus both as Lord and as Son of David. So she knew who he claimed to be. But it seems Jesus ignored her, and so she continued to follow

them, crying out to his disciples. They were so upset by this that they urged Jesus to send her away.

Jesus answered in a way that seemed to express something of the exclusiveness of the Jewish thinking of the day. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he said. We may find that confusing, because we know that Jesus died for everyone.

Then we have this interesting conversation between Jesus and the Gentile woman. When she begs for his help, he says, "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

Here is another confusing comment from Jesus – in fact one which may even offend us. We say to ourselves that it's really not very nice for Jesus to call the woman a DOG. To our 21st century Western ears it sounds belittling and unkind.

But we need to remember that every culture and every language has its colloquialisms. Even in our own culture, we use animal metaphors to communicate ideas – and they're actually NOT offensive. For instance, we might call a hard-nosed criminal lawyer a 'bulldog' in his quest for justice. We might say of someone who works extremely hard that they 'work like a dog', or if someone is particularly resistant to technology, we might say that we 'can't teach an old dog new tricks.'

None of these terms is particularly offensive – they're just colloquialisms and metaphors. In Jesus' day the term he used in his conversation with the Gentile woman was in this vein. The Jews simply called the Gentiles dogs (actually, the original Greek is better translated little dog, or puppy) He wasn't calling her names or belittling her.

In this conversation, Jesus was not being exclusive, nor expressing prejudice. He was stating something really important; that he was called first to share the message of salvation with the Jews. This was the natural order that the Father had decreed. Jesus didn't exclude the Gentiles, it was simply that he was to take the message to the Jews first.

This was the natural order of things, because it was the Jews to whom God had revealed himself and the Jews that God had called to be his chosen people; they were to serve him faithfully, and to be a nation of priests to the Gentiles. They were to be the conduit of the blessing of God to the rest of the nations. And so it was the Jews who had fallen the furthest!

So for the whole of the salvation story, it was important that the Jews be offered salvation first.

I might be helpful to think of a river that has been dammed. If you want to release the water to flow again through the river, you need to go to the major blockage, which is the dam. It will not help much to clear minor blockages further downstream. Clear the dam and the river will flow.

This pattern is not only marked by Jesus own ministry, it is how his disciples were directed to preach the Gospel. With the sending out of the 70, it was to the house of Israel. With the Great Commission, it was to preach the Gospel first in Jerusalem (Jews), Samaria (a people who had Jewish heritage), then the ends of the earth. (The Gentiles)

This order of things did not exclude the Gentiles – it merely meant they were next in line to hear the Good News.

Coming back to the story; it had been Jesus' very recent experience that the Jewish hierarchy was rejecting him. Now, in front of him, was a distraught Gentile woman who epitomised the need of the rest of the world.

She was unknowingly speaking prophetically when she said, "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Jesus commended her faith, and her daughter was healed.

This story is a theological king pin if you like. It exemplifies God's heart for his chosen people, yet his desire and plan to save the whole world.

You and I live on the Gentile side of this king pin. It has been pulled, and we now share in the blessings of God's people.

Rather than seeing this story as an indication that God is EXCLUSIVE - that is, excluding people from his kingdom for various reasons, it is in fact the opposite. In showing Jesus' willingness to engage with this Gentile woman and to heal her daughter in a very exclusive culture, the story in fact shows the INCLUSIVENESS of God.

This is a theme we can see throughout Jesus' ministry. He socialised with and even called friends, people who were excluded from Jewish society - people such as tax collectors, the ill and handicapped, the untouchable, women, and any who were labelled 'sinners'.

Then, with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the early church included people from all cultures and all walks of life. In the church, all people, regardless of their race, social position, health, profession or gender, who acknowledged Jesus as Lord and Savior were promised the power of the indwelling Spirit. (Acts 2:39; Romans 8:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

Paul expresses God's inclusiveness succinctly in Galatians 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

There is much for us to ponder from this story at this point in Australia's social development. With the coming plebiscite on same sex-marriage, we need to be very careful about how we respond to this particular issue. There are Christians on both sides of the fence.

Sadly certain parts of the church, in their zeal for promoting their own understanding of the truth, have generated a great deal of pain and ill-will between themselves and those they label as 'wrong' and 'sinful', It has generated exclusion and prejudice.

We will all have an opinion on this issue. But even within the church, these opinions will be diverse. What is important is that at all times, we remain aware that God's love includes all people, and respond to those with whom we disagree, with grace and love. Jesus showed us that ALL people are welcome in God's embrace.

We need to be careful that as we stick up for what we believe to be the truth, we do so without demeaning or ostracising or even condemning those who believe differently.

This week, all parishes have received a pastoral letter from Bishop Stuart. Let me quote briefly from it as we close:

"The formal position of the Anglican Church of Australia,(is that marriage) is a lifelong union between a man and a woman. I personally endorse this historic definition.

That said, as a matter of conscience and conviction, a great many fellow believers hold views which are nuanced from or significantly at variance with mine. It is incumbent upon me (and us all) to lovingly and graciously - and in all humility- listen carefully to our friends and loved ones whilst seeking the Lord's direction for the decision we must take. "

May this love and grace colour our own interactions with people in this debate.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, you have reconciled us to yourself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation.

Help us to see each other, as you see each of us.

Help us to listen to each other, as you listen patiently to each of us.

Help us to love each other, with the love that you have for each of us.

Renew us by your Holy Spirit, so that our conversation may be characterised by love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control for the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.