

Year A, Proper 20. 16th August 2026

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8. Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32. Matthew 15: 10-28.

God's kingdom is open to..?

Some of you may have worked out that I am not much of an introverted thinker, by which I mean someone who sits quietly in their study working complex things out. I tend towards working things out by talking through a problem or challenge, and often as I talk, or offer up a view, I get greater clarity and can arrive at a sensible solution. I wonder where you fit in to this continuum? It isn't that I can't do the quiet introverted thinking, it's just that my preferred style is to explore an idea of challenge through conversation.

I always had Jesus down as an introverted thinker; someone who processed things whilst quiet, during prayer on a hillside alone before others awoke. Although maybe what I think of as introverted thinking and praying was actually have a conversation with his Father to work through things!

Today's gospel reading was quite long – and in fact verses 10-20 are optional, only verses 21 to 28 are required to be proclaimed. 21 to 28 is the section about Jesus' interaction with the Canaanite or Syrophenician woman. However, I think the first 11 verses are important to understanding the second half of this reading.

In the first ten verses of chapter 15 the writer informs us that Jesus had been exploring the rules and what lay behind them in the Jewish faith. True to form, Jesus appraised the rules and regulations with a simple lens. If the rules hindered people from living lives and had no real impact on how well they cared for themselves and others, Jesus challenged those rules and regulations. He saw them as a major barrier to people living according to aims of God's kingdom.

Jesus called a crowd to gather around him so he could impress upon them that what you ate was not going to cause you to be in God's bad books. But, what people said and how they said it can cause individuals to move away from God,

or as Jesus put it in that context, “it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles”. This teaching would have been shocking to adherents of the Jewish faith – whose lives were governed especially by what you could eat, what food was totally forbidden to eat or even touch. We sort of gloss over it with a shrug and think to ourselves, “of course, that makes sense”. But although we don’t know the reaction of the crowd, we do know that Peter, on behalf of the disciples, asks Jesus to explain what he meant. Jesus makes clear that what comes out of the mouth originated in the values and personal judgments of each person, i.e. from their heart, and it is this that defiles. Our tongue can far too easily give away our thoughts, and they may well not align with kingdom values, to put it mildly.

Although Matthew doesn’t focus on it, if you were to sit with this first part of the gospel reading, and use Lectio Divina to place yourself in the crowd or as one of the disciples, I think you would find yourself shocked by what Jesus said – running so contrary to centuries of Jewish teachings and written in the Pentateuch. A rule that created a divide between Jews and all other people, a rule that reinforced identity and the purity of the Jews. A rule that created a them and us.

Matthew intentionally places that story of conflict and over-throwing an ancient set of rules that ran so deep in that society just before the story of Jesus meeting the Syrophenician woman. We all know this story, and again I think we fail to be shocked by the exchange. Jesus calls the woman and her daughter ‘dogs’; which in that society placed them way down the order of acceptability, a phrase to demean and dismiss her.

All credit to this woman. Did she yell at Jesus? Does she argue with him? Did she slink away, having been put in her place, offended by his remarks? No. She astutely chooses another way - to engage Jesus as an equal and not to let her feelings control her interactions. Her response to Jesus is to say that even dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table. She, astonishingly, chooses to identify with the dogs, to get her point over – that **even** dogs are included.

Her astute response really seems to have landed with a metaphorical wallop on Jesus. Although Matthew implies Jesus responded to her straight away, in my

playing out of this scene, I imagine there is pause as her words sink in, as Jesus processes them, as he reassesses his own default values and thinking about people from Samaria and from other lands and belief systems. Having recently taught the crowd and disciples about ditching their preconceived ideas about food, and ditching years of rules and regulations about diet, about identity and who was 'in' and who was 'out', Jesus was confronted with needing to reassess his own framework, the values he held in his heart, from which his love flowed.

This woman was a great teacher, and Jesus learnt a valuable lesson that day, and I am sure greatly influenced how he thought about his ministry and teachings from that day on – his view of those who were not Jewish, and what part they could and should play in being part of God's kingdom to earth and also in facilitating the bringing of God's kingdom to earth.

It could have been a split second later, or maybe after a second or two which might have felt like 30 for the woman as she waited for Jesus to respond, that Jesus said,

'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish'. And her daughter was healed from that moment.

I am sure you have all recognised that the compilers of the lectionary are so smart, by including Isaiah 56, especially verses 6-8, as a related reading today. Those verses promise that all foreigners, all the outcasts of Israel, will be gathered and that God's house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Yes, for all peoples. No exceptions, not for Syrophoenicians, nor Canaanites, nor Samaritans. God's kingdom is not just for the Jews, but for all people.

Matthew clearly leads us, the readers of his gospel, to see the ministry of Jesus developing, and Jesus' vision and mission expanding to include all peoples. His message of love cannot create any barriers, nor opportunities for people to identify as 'us' and for the rest to be 'others' or 'them', people we consider less than ourselves. The love of God is not constrained by any label, any identifier we care to affix to someone. It has to be a universal love, for all people, because we are **all** made in the image of God, without exception.

In our society there are many siren voices, backed by a lot of money, enticing us to see one group or another as undeserving, as different from 'us' – implying

they are in some way of less value than us. Just now it is a frightening array of people labelled as 'other' by groups; asylum-seekers, migrants, even second or third generation migrants who came here because the government needed to entice people from the Empire and then Commonwealth to support the post-war economy. And many other groups are also labelled as 'other', the disabled, those reliant on state benefits, and of course, members of the LGBTQI communities.

When you hear or read stories, divisive stories, trying to scare you into thinking every non-white person is simultaneously taking all the jobs whilst also being useless, and living on unemployment benefit, please engage your senses. Please look at these stories through the eyes of Jesus. I am sure he would have been outraged at some of the content of newspapers owned by the very wealthy, who live in tax-havens abroad, trying to manipulate the thoughts and emotions of people in the UK.

Remember that Jesus flipped tables – I wonder what he would have done to challenge and upset the purveyors of hate and division in the 21st century? When we read such material or watch programmes or social media blogs or posts that create hatred and division in our society, it is so easy to be sucked in to it.

Our gospel reading is sobering. Jesus was challenged by a smart-thinking woman, who through her response to Jesus, helped him see the limitations of his own culture and background, and changed forever how he saw his mission. God's love can have no boundaries; the moment we put boundaries in place we create an 'us' and 'them', and this is contrary to our vision for God's kingdom on earth.

At the dismissal you hear the words, 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord'. There are not exclusions, or footnotes to clarify who is 'in' and who is 'out', who deserves to be loved. We are to love all, no ifs or buts and definitely no exceptions. That is the only way we can truly serve the Lord. So follow the rule Jesus gave us - a simple rule to say, but a challenge to always adhere to. 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' And your neighbour is anyone affected by your presence on earth.