

THE EMMAUS SERIES

20th Sunday, Year A

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-7

Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32

Matthew 15: 21-28

Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted

Sometimes the gospel narrative has a ring of authenticity that is unmistakable. The response of Jesus to the Canaanite woman, in today's reading, must have been puzzling - even embarrassing - to Christian converts from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Jesus, in fact, echoes the Jewish custom in his time, of referring to Gentiles as 'dogs'. It can only have been retained in the gospel tradition because it was what he had said. Those who heard the brave woman pleading for her daughter against all odds – she was an outsider appealing to a Jewish teacher, a plaintive voice in a very masculine world – must have remembered her story as a remarkable moment in the life of the Saviour. What is more, she is remembered as seeming to get the better of Jesus in their exchange. But this exchange leads, in the end, to a moment that those who witnessed it would never forget, confronting them with the generous and inclusive ways of God: 'Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted'.

Once again we should recall that this incident is included in a narrative section of Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus is instructing his disciples. A significant part of the community for whom this gospel was written had belonged to a Jewish community that was extremely exclusive and intolerant. This attitude is puzzling, because the Old Testament scriptures included a remarkable vision of God's plan as ultimately inclusive of all peoples. Abraham was promised that he would be father of many nations; the prophets looked forward to the peoples of the world – even Israel's enemies – flocking to Jerusalem to worship the true God. In today's reading from Isaiah, the prophet declares, in the name of God, 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples'. As they embraced the Christian faith, Matthew's community would have recognised that this great vision was being fulfilled with the inclusion of the Gentiles. But old ways die hard. They needed to renew their identification with the inclusive ways of God - something we too need to do as we meet the misconceptions and unfriendliness of today's post-Christian outlook.

But why did Jesus hesitate, seeming to share in the intolerance of his contemporaries? The immediate task of the mission he had received from his Father was to call the chosen people back to the role that had been given them in a plan that was to benefit the whole human family - 'I was sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel'. If they had been true to the covenant, learning to identify with the ways of God, they would have fulfilled their mission to be 'a light to the nations', a living invitation to find the true God. Jesus so angered the people of his own town of Nazareth, when he spoke of the inclusive ways of God, that they wanted to stone him. This issue was probably an important factor in the conflict that led to his death. In his exchange with the woman, he was probably referring to the messianic banquet of the end-time, that he had foretold would be shared by people coming from the East and the West. In the end, the extraordinary generosity of his words to the pagan woman, 'Woman, you have great faith', cancels out the apparent rejection of his first words to her. They invite us to rejoice that we share in her faith. We know he is the true 'light to the nations', fulfilling in his person the great destiny of Israel, bringing the whole human family to join in the messianic banquet.

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