

Sunday 16th August 2020

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Prayer

Lord Jesus, Son of David, Son of God,
your blessings know no boundaries
that faith cannot cross.

Strengthen us to trust in your mercy,
reach out for your healing,
and receive your reconciliation. **Amen.**

Psalm 133

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there
the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

Prayer

Let us confess our sins without fear
to the One who yearns to embrace us,
forgive us, protect us, and bless us.

Have mercy on us, Lord Jesus; we are tormented!

Our lives have been disrupted

by our own desires and self-centred concern.

We are dismayed at your presence,

anguished by the awful consequences of our own failures.

We cannot take back what we have said

or undo what we have done

or atone for the hurt we have caused.

We are haunted by the past,

plagued by the present,

and fearful for the future.

We shrink away from your gaze

as strangers outside your circle of blessing.

Yet the faith you have planted in us

reaches out for your favour,

returns to your presence,

and hungers for your mercy,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our God blesses us with kindness,

forgiving our sins,

preserving our lives,

and restoring our souls
through the abundant provision of
our Lord Jesus Christ.
Receive now that for which faith has hungered:
you are forgiven and healed in the name
of Jesus Christ.

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. And 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."²⁸ 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

Merciful Savior, your suffering has saved our lives,
secured our future,
and restored us to relationship with God.
Remove the shame and fear
that cause us to cower in your presence.
By the power of your Spirit,
open our eyes and hearts
to your Word of love, mercy,
healing, and blessing;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

God is God not of the chosen few, but of all creation, of all nations and peoples, of all times and places, God of a universe whose immensity we can yet only guess at, whose limits are beyond our comprehension and yet are encompassed by God's being.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day thought themselves chosen by God – who had, according to their scriptures chosen Abraham to be the founding father of their people in a land promised to them by God; the same God had saved them from suffering and death in Egypt and established a covenant with them in the days of Moses, giving them laws by which to live and flourish. It is no surprise then, that believing themselves to be a chosen nation, they came to think themselves not just different, but superior to the peoples around them.

That way of thinking is what is at first evident in the story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in today's gospel reading. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel', and perhaps also in the disciples, when they urge Jesus to send the woman away. Here is the understanding writ large, of – to coin a phrase - an 'Israel First' way of thinking that privileged one people or nation above all others. It's a world-view that is often to the fore in the gospel of Matthew, who of all four gospels holds closest to Jewish tradition and understanding in portraying the life of Jesus.

Yet the same gospel reading also reveals a new attitude, a change of mind and heart in Jesus, when confronted by the woman desperately seeking help for her suffering daughter. Where at first it seems as if Jesus just didn't want to know – after all, he has crossed over from Galilee into the region of Tyre and Sidon, exhausted by the constant demands of his ministry among the people of his home region. Seeking respite from the crowds, he might well have been hoping for a moment of peace in a place where he was not yet known, as he does on a number of occasions.

Jesus here is in foreign territory, outwith the borders of Palestine; the population is not Jewish but descendants of the Phoenicians who had settled the coastal plain of the Mediterranean. Jewish self understanding combined with exasperation that even here there is no escape from the needs of people in distress, we can understand what seems like a sharp rebuke from Jesus.

As always, though, Jesus cannot turn away from human suffering when he encounters it. Frustrated and tired as he may have been, he cannot remain unmoved, but, confronted again by the persistence of the woman, responds in compassion to her faith and trust in his power, heals her daughter.

Jesus may have thought, at first, that God had sent him only to Israel – that is, to the Jewish people of his own community and nation; but what we know is that God's intentions in Jesus reach out far beyond Israel to embrace every nation and all people, in every age and place. In Jesus, God establishes a new covenant, a new relationship, that broadens and deepens what has gone before, so that all creation is encompassed by the love and grace of God.

We see this truth today in the way in which Jesus crosses the boundary between the Jewish and the Gentile world. He may not have intended it, but when he finds faith and trust in the gentile world and this woman who pleads for her daughter, he understands that the power in him – God's life-giving, life-restoring, life-enriching power – is not limited by geographical or ethnic or historical boundaries. God's power has effect wherever in the world people seek it out.

In the course of his ministry, Jesus crossed many boundaries – religious, cultural, and social, in mixing with the poorest and most excluded, in sitting down with tax collectors and other sinners, in healing people on the Sabbath, in healing the sick and raising the dead, in associating with women who were not of his own family. He also challenged his own people, to look beyond pride in their ancestry, and their history, beyond their sense of superiority, beyond the limits of their own community, and see what God was doing in other

nations, and with and for other peoples.

In this gospel passage, we see laid out God's purpose to extend the covenant. made with Israel, to include the whole world and indeed the entire creation; to bring about a new relationship grounded not in the written law but in the re-creative power of the indwelling Spirit that transforms hearts and minds. A covenant sealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, who as the risen Christ reigns over all things.

In this moment, in his actions and by his words, Jesus teaches his disciples this essential truth that we as Christians already know: that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor male and female. All are made in the image of God and all are loved equally by God, without distinction. Our diversity of culture, language, history, tradition, and belief as human beings is truly marvellous, and we should rejoice in it; and equally, from scripture, we affirm that no person, nation, or people is of greater value in God's sight than any other.

Prayer

Let us pray for the needs of the world, saying,
Lord help us. We trust in you.

God of mercy and healing,
you are Lord of all,
embracing the estranged,
blessing the banished,
reconciling the rejected.
We cry out to you now,
confident that your provision is
abundantly more than enough
to preserve the church, redeem the world,
and deliver the tormented.
Lord, help us. **We trust in you.**

For your people, the house of Israel,
and the household of faith near and far,
Lord, help us. **We trust in you.**

That the church may replicate your reconciliation,
model your mercy, and herald your healing for all,
Lord, help us. **We trust in you.**

For unity and harmony to flow freely

among your creatures and throughout your creation,
Lord, help us. **We trust in you.**

For reconciliation and new beginnings
among estranged families, races, nations, and peoples,
Lord, help us. **We trust in you.**

For healing for those who are tormented, rejected,
marginalized, fearful, forgotten, cast off,
Lord, help us. **We trust in you.**

For those whose names we now lift in your presence,
silently or aloud.

...

Lord, help us. **We trust in you.**

For our ancestors in the faith,
now kept in your care and never forgotten by you,
Lord, help us. **We trust in you.**

We stand within your encircling arms,
embraced and healed by you, blessed by you,
remembered by you, protected,
grateful for your loving care. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory
are yours, now and for ever.

Amen.