

## Beyond the Pale

17 8 14

Almighty God  
who sent your Holy Spirit  
to be the light and life of your Church:  
open our hearts to the riches of your grace,  
that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit  
in love and joy and peace.

Our text this morning may be found in today's gospel and is Matthew 14 v 28

**'And her daughter was healed instantly.'**

Do you ever feel like an outsider – someone beyond the pale? Easy enough, I imagine, to feel an outsider if you're British living in France though here in Brittany, close to the border with Normandy, you could well feel at home given our possible Celtic roots or Norman ancestors. The phrase 'beyond the pale' dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century when the Pale in question referred to that part of Ireland then under English control. The word 'pale' itself comes from the Latin – 'palium', a stake, and hence it came to mean a fence. Those outside the fence were outside 'the bounds of civilisation', people lacking in 'civilised behaviour'. Today's gospel focuses on someone clearly beyond the pale – the Syro-Phoenician woman, a Canaanite, a native of Tyre and Sidon, clearly herself not a Jew.

But before we look at today's gospel passage, let me briefly refer to today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans which begins with this challenging question 'Has God rejected his people ?' A curious question for a Jew to ask concerning the Jewish nation. Paul, a circumcised Jew, theologically literate, the Apostle to the Gentiles, was concerned that in reaching out to the Gentiles, God was rejecting the People in whom he had chosen to embody the faith, the Children of Israel. And his answer in the following verse is a simple reaffirmation of the truth as Paul saw it that 'God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.' To Paul, no one is beyond the love of God, beyond the reach of his loving arms: Jew and Gentile alike we are all called to be part of the family of God.

And so to today's miracle which neatly illustrates the point from a Gentile's point of view. Matthew's gospel was originally written with a Jewish Christian reader in mind. It presents Christ as the Jewish Messiah, fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament. Matthew presents Jesus as the Son of God whose mission is primarily to the Chosen People of God, the Jews. But here, Matthew is showing us that mission could and would reach out to the non-Jew too. But it does not make easy or comfortable reading.

I think the phrase to describe Jesus' withdrawal from Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon might best be described as 'down-time' – a chance to get away from the crowds and the demands of teaching in order to be alone with his disciples. But even here, his reputation has attracted attention and, in this instance, attention that is both noisy and unwelcome.

So what's going on ? A Canaanite woman is shouting, shouting after them. And what is she shouting ? 'Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David: my daughter is tormented by a demon.' And what does Jesus do ? He ignores her ! But clearly she is getting on the disciples' nerves so they urge Jesus to send her packing. So Jesus simply tells her 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' which was literally true at that moment of time – initially Jesus had come to the Jews and later, after his death and resurrection, the gospel would be taken on to all nations. But the woman persists. Kneeling at his feet, she simply says 'Lord help me.' And again Jesus dismisses her with what to modern ears sounds rather sharp – 'It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' But even here the woman is not put off and replies 'Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.' And her faith and persistence is rewarded: 'Woman, great is your faith ! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter is healed.

So what can we take from today's scripture ? Simply the encouraging fact that no one is literally outside the love of God, beyond the reach of his grace. So the next time you feel down and out of it, take heart – no one is beyond the pale !

I have spoken in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist  
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