

**HOMILY**  
**10AM ST GEORGE'S, MALVERN**  
**20 AUGUST 2017**

**Jesus, the Canaanite woman and the historical background.**

The opening sentence of scripture for today declares:

*"Thus says the Lord maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed" Isa.56.1* being a merging of the second and third prophecies of Isaiah.

These words relate to the return of God's people from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem. God has liberated his people through King Cyrus and they are free to return home. The worship of the Temple is restored, the Temple itself finally rebuilt and so the covenant between Yahweh and His people is reaffirmed. This means that they also have moral obligations to uphold justice and righteousness in the land, according to the Law of Moses, from which they had often strayed to their peril.

Before the exile, foreigners had been able to perform certain temple functions and now under the new regime they can continue, so long as they observe the Sabbath and keep the covenant with God. In other words, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants, keeping the Sabbath and holding fast to the covenant. Then comes the promise *'I will bring you to my holy mountain and make you joyful in my house of prayer, which shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples'*.

So God gathers together the outcastes of Israel, those who had been left behind in Jerusalem, and others, besides those who had been together in Babylon and returned home. This is not an unqualified universalism, not yet, but at least it is a vision offered to them, a foreshadowing of the universalism of the gospel. When the Temple is destroyed after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Temple is replaced by Jesus' risen body as declared by St John in his gospel account of John.2.19-21

So these are the themes forming the historical background of what is to come with the advent of the Jesus' promised Messianic mission.

We move forward 500 years to a particular event in today's Gospel when Jesus of Nazareth goes into Canaan, that hostile, foreign territory to the west of the Jordan River extending to the Mediterranean coast, where he encounters a distraught Syro-Phoenecian woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon or an evil spirit. She is indeed a foreigner, a gentile, a woman alone, and yet she boldly addresses him with the typical Jewish formula as she shouts "*Lord, Son of David*".

Clearly upset and anxious, her shouting offends the disciples and Jesus initially doesn't respond to her, not because he is offended, but primarily because he does not want to exceed the terms of his mission which first of all to his own people, the errant house of Israel, the lost sheep, who must be called back to faith and back to the covenant with Yahweh whom he called 'Father'.

She then takes a humbler, more conciliatory approach, kneeling at his feet pleading "*Lord help me*". Then comes that strange verbal encounter "*it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs*". She is undeterred she picks up the imagery and deftly turns it to her advantage, replying "*yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.*" He marvels at her response to his challenge declaring "*O woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire*". Immediately her stricken daughter is healed, and delivered from demonic possession.

By way of contrast in today's letter to the Romans, Paul, who called himself a '*Hebrew of the Hebrews*' speaks here as "*an apostle to the gentiles*", preaching the universality of the good news for all people. Yet he also writes in Romans 11.29 that although the hearts of the people of Israel have hardened in their rejection of the preaching of the message of universal salvation, '*nevertheless, the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable*'.

Somehow that Canaanite woman in her deep distress recognised this truth as she made her bold plea for her daughter. She must have sensed that Jesus, himself a Jew with a clear messianic calling to heal his own people first, would also respond to the faith of strangers and outsiders like herself when they humbly seek his healing and acceptance.

Here then is another sign that the ancient barriers between Jew and gentile are to be, and are being broken down through faith in Jesus death and resurrection.

So there is a unitive theme running through all three readings of scripture today, in Isaiah 2 and 3, Romans and Matthew. Our task today and our response clearly is to wrestle with the 'particularity' and 'universality' of the gospel for both are valid principles which are to be carefully counter balanced. Israel has a unique place in the history of salvation, because the gifts of God and the call of God are irrevocable once they have been conferred. At the same time, the temple has now become Christ's body and succeeds it as a '*house of prayer for all nations*'. So we pray through him as the great high priest '*through Jesus Christ our Lord*'

Thus it remains our steadfast prayer, especially in these troubled times, that all races, peoples and nations will come and praise the God of all creation who is all and in all, knowing that faith in God, faith ALONE will open up salvation for the gentiles and Jews and all faiths when we all kneel before the throne of grace and submit to His Kingly rule.

Amen