

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67 (66); Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Matt 15:21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 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.” 23 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.” 24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26 He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 27 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.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This extremely interesting story is found also in Mark 7:24-30, but not in Luke. (Luke may omit it because he writes for a Gentile community and for him openness to the Gentiles is no longer an issue.) Both versions are striking and the differences between them shed a great deal of light on the “project” of each gospel writer. Here’s is Mark’s version:

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and

the demon gone. (Mark 7:24–30)

In Mark, Jesus seems to go alone and for no purpose. He enters a house, apparently because he did not want to be recognised in an area where he has never been. The child is a little daughter. The woman is extremely respectful. Only then are we told she was a Gentile (lit. a Greek), a Syrophenician. Using a parabolic saying, Jesus implies that his message is for the children and not the outsiders (“dogs”). Her witty response gains her her request—i.e. her faith is implicitly recognised. Jesus exorcises the child and the cure is fully reported in v. 30.

Matthew has fundamentally the same story, but with significant adjustments. Jesus goes to Tyre and Sidon, this time with his disciples. He does not go indoors and is not afraid to be recognised. We are told immediately that the woman is a Canaanite. Matthew supplies the woman’s words, which are rich in meaning (“Lord”, “son of David”). Jesus ignores her. The disciples intervene, but only to confirm Jesus’ apparent rebuff. V. 24 is special to Matthew. Eventually, the woman changes her tone and posture, begging for help (“Lord”). Jesus’ reply is shorter, perhaps in the light of v.24. The woman agrees with what Jesus has said and only then goes on, in the same parabolic vein, to make her request. Her faith is explicitly acknowledged and the cure is proclaimed. The confirmation is reported in as few words as possible.



Thought for the day

In today’s Gospel, Jesus changes his mind! How is that possible? Twice in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus limits his ministry to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6; 15:24). In today’s story, however, a very feisty woman, clearly not a daughter of Abraham, with her urgency and her witty retort, brings Jesus to recognise the needs of those beyond the ethnic confines of the Jewish people. They are ordinary human beings too, just as much in need of the Good News of the Kingdom as anyone else.

Prayer

We believe and we know, O God, that you love the human race, without make any distinction of persons or rank. Inspire us to see you in everyone we meet, for all are your children and you are the father of us all.

Both accounts are strange. Jesus seems to make this journey for no purpose, has a chance encounter and returns. In Mark, there is indoor / outdoor symbolism, suggesting insiders / outsiders. Matthew makes the purpose and problem very clear in v.24. In both accounts, a foreign woman causes Jesus to open his preaching to non-Israelites. The story is never resumed again. The comments below will bring out further details.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the OT, Elijah cures children and outsiders. The Moses background to Jesus’ ministry has just been underlined in the feeding of the 5,000 (aimed at Jews). The next story following is the feeding of the 4,000 (aimed at Gentiles, with Elijah echoes). The Elijah precedent gives biblical authority to opening the preaching of the Kingdom to Gentiles.

KIND OF WRITING

There are two stories here and two levels. The motivating story concerns a sick child and mother’s plea. Without this the second story—a theological argument using the significant image of bread,

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples

Isa 56:1 Thus says the LORD:
 Maintain justice, and do what is right,
 for soon my salvation will come,
 and my deliverance be revealed.

2 Happy is the mortal who does this,
 the one who holds it fast,
 who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,
 and refrains from doing any evil.

3 *Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
 "The LORD will surely separate me from his people";
 and do not let the eunuch say,
 "I am just a dry tree."*

4 *For thus says the LORD:
 To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,*

5 *I will give, in my house and within my walls,
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
 I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off.*

6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
 to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
 and to be his servants,
 all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
 and hold fast my covenant—

7 these I will bring to my holy mountain,
 and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
 their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
 will be accepted on my altar;
 for my house shall be called a house of prayer
 for all peoples.

8 *Thus says the Lord GOD,
 who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
 I will gather others to them
 besides those already gathered.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

It can still cause surprise that certain texts in the Old Testament are so inclusive of foreigners. Our passage today, from Third Isaiah, is a remarkable example. The full text, vv.1-7, has been shortened, possibly on account of the mention of eunuchs which might obscure the meaning for the modern reader. It is a pity, however, that v. 8 is not included in the lectionary. As often, the full text is presented here.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The passage comes from Third Isaiah and reflects conditions just after the return from the Exile. It speaks of inclusion of the foreigner and acceptance of the eunuch on account of their conver-

sion of heart.

KIND OF WRITING

It is biblical poetry, showing the usually parallelism, in a more flexible way. It is also a kind of formula of conversion and at the same time it constitutes a polemic against a narrow nationalism and exclusionary attitudes as exemplified in the Deuteronomist, as well as in Ezra and Nehemiah (see below).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

On justice

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

On happiness

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; (Psalms 1:1) Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times. (Psalms 106:3)

On the Sabbath

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isa 58:13-14)

On foreign conversions

It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. (Ezra 6:21)

On separation from "the people of the land"

No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:1-3; cf. 7:1-6)

After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way." (Ezra 9:1-2)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Ps 67 (66) is a meditation on the priestly blessing in Number 6:22-26, but extended to all people. The response say it all.

THE GOSPEL LINK

The Gospel illustrates the widening of the offer of the kingdom to include people who are clearly non-Jews. What already began in post-exilic period continues in the ministry of Jesus.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 This is a general appeal, in the context of the return from exile. *How* this is to be done is unfolded in the subsequent verses. Cf. Exod 19:5; Deut 6:5; Micah 6:8. “My salvation” comes at the hands of the Persian overlord.

Verse 2 The emphasis falls on observing the Sabbath. The weekly Sabbath is probably a custom from the Exile onwards only. Accordingly, it is emphasised especially in Third Isaiah: Isa 1:13; 56:2, 6; 58:13; 66:23.

Verse 3 The foreigner is one who has come to faith in YHWH. Conversion to the faith of Israel is phenomena from this time onwards. Ezra and Nehemiah show a very different, more exclusionary attitude. Cf. Dt 23:1-3. The mention of eunuchs—a feature of the Babylonian royal court as of many others, including the papal!—reflects a concern that such individuals would be excluded from the benefits of belonging fully to the people because they would have no offspring. Notice the insulting reference to their infertility.

Verse 4 Integrity of heart—not that of body—is what counts before the Lord.

Verse 5 Even eunuchs will have a lasting memorial at God’s hands. Cf. *Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar that is in the King’s Valley, for he said, “I have no son to keep my name in remembrance”; he called the pillar by his own name. It is called Absalom’s Monument to this day.* (2Samuel 18:18) (The Hebrew in Isaiah here says literally “a hand and a name”, *yad vashem*, the title given to the museum of the Shoah in Jerusalem.)

Verse 6 This verse offers a detailed depiction of the fourfold behaviour which marks the converted.

Verse 7 One of the greatest texts of inclusion in the Bible. The basis for this may be found in Num 15:14-16 and Lev 22:18-25. Cf. *Jesus was teaching and saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’ But you have made it a den of robbers.”* (Mark 11:17)

Verse 8 The first wave of returnees was small; it will be supplemented by other Judeans and even by foreigners.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. As we tend to think of ourselves as insiders, it is no harm to recall that when Isaiah speaks of the inclusion of foreigners, it is all Gentiles (= ourselves) who are intended! We are the ones called to conversion, fidelity, justice and prayer.

2. The tendency to exclude has not gone away and, especially in times of pressure / harassment there can be a temptation to self preservation, even sectarianism. As we know from Jesus’ teaching and practice, the burden of proof must lie with those who exclude.

3. It helps from time to time to reflect, in dialogue with the biblical texts, on my image of God. What does Isaiah say about God here? Is there anything I especially need to pay attention to?

PRAYER

Our God and father, you love the human race and call us all into relationship with you. As we benefit from your loving welcome, may we in turn welcome and love others who are your children too. Help us to set aside prejudices, to take down barriers, to open our arms that more people may experience and know that such is our God.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

Our reading should have an especial appeal today. It shows the Jews, just returned from bitter Exile in Babylon, opening their arms to all peoples, thus widening the offer of grace.

Second reading

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

This reading goes a little bit in the opposite direction. In Rome, the non-Jewish Christians came to regard themselves as included in the grace of Christ but also as superior to God’s first chosen people. Paul puts them right in a very important phrase: *God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice.* This little phrase is a keystone for contemporary Jewish and Christian dialogue.

Gospel

Matthew 15:21-28

Women get a lowish profile in the Gospels, so it is refreshing today to read this story of a woman whose love for her daughter and whose quick wit engage with Jesus very fruitfully. The story illustrates also the inclusion of Gentiles in

the mission of the early church.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

The excerpts from Ezekiel take us through fierce critique to renewed vision and hope. The Church is living through very difficult times—herself partly to blame—and yet there is hope in God.

Monday 18 August

Ezekiel 24:15-24

The prophets are called sometimes to illustrate their teaching with an action. This is perhaps the most disturbing prophetic gesture—and the message could hardly be clearer.

Tuesday 19 August *St John Eudes*

Ezekiel 28:1-10

Today we hear a fierce critique of absolute rulers who set themselves up as gods over their people. “Being swollen with pride”, they are now corrected by God.

Wednesday 20 August *St Bernard*

Ezekiel 34:1-11

Ezekiel—whose ministry took place just before and then during the Exile in Babylon—read that disaster as punishment for the total failure of leadership, both political and religious. He is very hard on the shepherds who feed themselves and not the flock.

Thursday 21 August *St Pius X*

Ezekiel 36:23-28

Eventually, Ezekiel comes to the question of renewal and restoration. In a marvellous passage he describes this as a conversion of heart, achieved not by human effort but by God alone. Long before transplants were thought of, Ezekiel portrays God as a surgeon.

Fri 22 August *Our Lady, mother and queen*

Ezekiel 37:1-14

We need a double lens to listen to this reading. First a political lens: the vision is a parable of restoration after the disaster of the Exile in Babylon. In other words, another generation will rise *and return*. At the same time, the metaphor of resurrection works only because people were already coming to faith in life after death.

Saturday 23 June

Ezekiel 43:1-7

Ezekiel believed profoundly in the importance of the Temple in Jerusalem and looked forward to its restoration. Our reading today hints at the return of God’s presence to the Holy of Holies.