

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 Jesus 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,

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.

Rom 11:13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Seeing that I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, 14 if somehow I could provoke my people to jealousy and save some of them. 15 For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

Rom 11:28 *In regard to the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but in regard to election they are dearly loved for the sake of the fathers.* 29 For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. 30 Just as you were formerly disobedient to God, but have now received mercy due to their disobedience, 31 so they too have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. 32 For God has consigned all people to disobedience so that he may show mercy to them all.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading contains a verse of immense significance for us today: *For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.* This single line is the cornerstone of Jewish and Christian dialogue since the Holocaust. Paul could not have foreseen that but he would certainly be approving. After centuries of persecution, at last we have begun to take seriously Paul's own teaching about his very own people.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The Jewish and Gentile constituencies of the Roman house churches seem to have been intensely competitive. Each could look down on the other for different reasons. The Jewish Christ-believers could point to their fidelity to the gift (grace) of the Law. The Gentiles, on the other hand, could point to a higher freedom in Christ, a freedom from the ethnocentricity of the "old" faith.

Within the the letter, Paul has arrived at another dangerous moment. In discussing in Romans 9-11 the relative places of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan of salvation, he has just noted that the failure of most Jews to accept Jesus as the messiah was both a fulfilment of Scripture and the responsibility of the Jews themselves. It would be easy for the Gentiles to fall back into a feeling of being superior after all. At that point, Paul writes one of his most marvellous passages, using the image of the olive

tree. It is unfortunate that for the sake of brevity, this "parable" itself is omitted, making the sequence of thought more difficult to track. The full text of the olive tree section is given below to be read *slowly*.

KIND OF WRITING

After the introduction (9:1-5) and before the conclusion (11:33-36), the central section has three proofs:

9:6-29 God's word has *not* failed
9:30-10:21 Israel's own righteousness
11:1-32 God has *not* rejected Israel

It was important to Paul the faithful Jew that God had not rejected Israel. The third argument in Rom 11:1-32 has itself several moments:

1-6 *A remnant has been faithful*
7-10 *A "hardening" came on most Israelites*
11-12 *The purpose of Israel's mistake*
13-24 *A warning to Gentiles*
25-32 *The revelation of the mystery*

Our reading overlaps the fifth and sixth sections.

RELATED PASSAGES

Now if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among them and participated in the richness of the olive root, do not boast over the branches. But if you boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. Then you will say, "The branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted! They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but fear! For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you.

Notice therefore the kindness and harshness of God—harshness toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And even they—if they do not continue in their unbelief—will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree? (Rom 11:17–24)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 13a This is the first time Paul addresses the Gentiles directly in Romans. He wants their full and undivided attention for what follows.

Verses 13b-14 To avert any potential misunderstanding, Paul affirms his own ministry to the Gentiles, while adding—provocatively surely—that he does it to make his very own people jealous! The communion of Jew and Gentile in Christ is at the heart of Paul's understanding of God's project in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Verse 15 Rejection could be either God's (temporary) rejection of Israel or Israel's rejection of the Messiah. The latter is more likely. *Their* rejection of Jesus led to his crucifixion and, paradoxically, to the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile on the cross. The *a fortiori* argument is in the form of a question: if a negative brought such blessing, what will a positive bring about? Paul will not separate Jesus' death from his resurrection.

Verses 28-29 After the olive tree section, Paul affirms God's continuing love for Israel. The importance of v. 29 could hardly be overstated. God's election of Israel still stands and the covenants have not been superseded. Seven gifts were listed above; the originating call is, of course, from God himself.

Verses 30-31 In beautifully balanced sentences, Paul explores the common experience of disobedience and grace. Gentiles too were disobedient once and came to grace: in the same way, God's first chosen people, now disobedient, will come to grace. Cf. vv. 13b-14 above.

Verse 32 Paul takes us back to the universal need of grace already explored in Romans 3 and 5. *For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* (Rom 3:22–23) *Consequently, just as condemnation for all people came through one transgression, so too through the one righteous act came righteousness leading to life for all people.* (Rom 5:18)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Has it ever been my experience that even a harmful "no" can lead to grace?

PRAYER

God of constant mercy, we are sinners and yet your gifts and call are irrevocable. Help us to take to heart your steadfast love that we too may be lovingly steadfast through Christ our Lord.

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.
- 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.

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. The full text is commented below.

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 conversion 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.

RELATED READINGS

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 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)

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.

THE LITURGY

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

READINGS 1 AND 3

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.

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.

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 somewhat low 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 Book of Judges is read only this week in Ordinary Time and never on a Sunday. This may be as well because while the book does have a theological framework, it can also be disconcerting, to say the least. It combines heroic tales, politics, social chaos with considerable violence and evidently immoral stories. These are not

offered for emulation (!) but as exceptionally severe warnings.

Monday 21 August

St Pius X, bishop of Rome

Judges 2:11-19

The book of Judges tells of the intermediate time between the entry into the Land and the setting up of a monarchy. Many, many times, it tells of the people falling into idolatrous practices with disastrous consequences.

Matthew 19:16-22

A failed calling is always tough to listen to. It does remind us that we become disciples not because *we* choose it but rather the *Lord* chooses us.

Tuesday 22 August

Our Lady, queen and mother

Judges 6:11-24

In response to social chaos and religious idolatry, God appoints leaders for his people, called "judges." Today we hear of the call of Gideon and of his encounter with God, a memorable tale.

Matthew 19:23-30

The question of Peter might seem strange, but riches were regarded as a blessing from God. How could a *gift from God* hinder us? Thus we see the values of the kingdom are quite "alternative."

Wednesday 23 August

St Rose of Lima

Judges 9:6-15

Our reading today is a justly famous parable from the Old Testament. Using the imagery of trees in a forest looking for a ruler, it warns against setting up a monarchy because only God should be the king over Israel. The shade of the thorn bush offers more than "pleasant coolness in the heat"! Monarchies, we are told, colonise and exploit and therefore be careful in wishing for one.

Matthew 20:1-16

This passage can surprise and even offend still. It is, of course, no basis for labour relations but a great basis for God-relations! Such a relief that we don't have to merit it or earn it in any way—all is grace.

Thursday 24 August

St Bartholomew, apostle

Apocalypse 21:9-14

What will heaven be like? Using a rich array of metaphors—marriage, jewellery, a city, the twelve tribes and the Lamb of God—our reading offers a stunning, vibrant and inviting portrait.

John 1:45-51

In this Gospel, the spread of the Good News is a kind of wildfire, with one person drawing another in. Symbolically, the fig tree referred to knowledge of God and evil and hence to the Torah which gives us this knowledge.

For the closing days of this week, we turn to the book of Ruth, a marvellously heart-warming account of love, grace and hospitality.

Friday 25 August

St Louis of France

Ruth 1:1, 3-6, 14-16, 22

The wonderful short novel which is the book Ruth begins in a sombre way, with three deaths and three widows. Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law is exemplary. (Not *really* suitable for weddings, however!!)

Matthew 22:34-40

Asked a penetrating question, Jesus as a good Jew gives two answers. The first is really the *Sh'ma Yisrael*, recited three times daily by observant Jews. The second great principle comes from a somewhat unlikely source, the book of Leviticus.

Saturday 26 August

Ruth 2:1-3, 8-11, 4:13-17

The women in this story are not without initiative. Of course, Ruth's reputation of faithfulness is very attractive and, as an extra bonus, a foreigner enters the lineage of the future David. Thus the book counters any exclusionary nationalism.

Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus is hard on the outward display of religion and the piling up of titles. It can still disturb today. Does Jesus have an alternative, another way? Yes—in a word, service.