

## SERMON FOR SUNDAY 16<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2020 ORDINARY 20A

**READINGS: Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Matthew 15: 10-28**

When I was a young woman I had a good friend at college named Zdenka. Her family were from what was then Yugoslavia, now Croatia. They had migrated to Australia when she was quite young to get away from the troubles in their homeland. Her family mostly socialised with other Yugoslav migrants, but breaking with tradition and family expectations, Zdenka married a man whose family had migrated from Northern Ireland.

A lot of people were quite surprised at her marriage to someone from such a different background, and she was often asked, "What did she and her husband have in common?"

Zdenka used to flippantly answer, "Terrorists on both sides of the family!"

Now this had a tiny bit of truth in it as both families had members who had been involved in protesting against their governments. However, it also has to be said that both Zdenka and her husband were very peace-loving people. After they married, they went to Europe on an extended holiday and visited both of their family homelands. Neither had seen their homeland since they were little children so they were keen to discover something about each other's heritage, to visit relatives and also to see the places their parents had told them about.

When Zdenka and her husband returned to Australia, I caught up with her over a meal to hear about her big trip. She told me a lot about all the places they had visited and the relatives from both her and her husband's families that they had stayed with.

She said that she couldn't get over how similar their two cultures really were, because, she said, in both Northern Ireland and Yugoslavia, people talked incessantly about the past and about the sufferings of their people, and about those they bore grudges against. And furthermore, the way they talked you would reckon they were talking about something that happened yesterday or maybe last week, but later on you would find that it happened four or six hundred years ago. There was a constant rehearsing and reminding of the hurts and grudges that divided their communities and nations, and by 'picking' at these 'sores' they were reinforcing their prejudices and hatreds.

It seems to me that as we look around the world today, we can see an awful lot of similarly prejudiced communities where old hatreds and enmities are kept alive and which keep festering, and erupting in violence and bigotry. The Middle East seems particularly prone to this never-ending cycle of divisions and hatreds and violence and persecution. Whether it be the Sunni Moslems versus the Shi itte Moslems, or the Israeli Jews versus the Palestinian Arabs, these cycles of prejudice and hatred continue unabated. And we know that some of these enmities stretch right back to Biblical times.

When we read today's Gospel reading we are reminded of a long held enmity and mistrust between Jews and Gentiles (pagans). Jews kept themselves separated from the Gentile population. They did not enter each other's houses or share meals or intermarry or socialise. They generally lived in separate villages. The Jews saw the Gentiles as unclean and outside of God's favour. They saw themselves as God's chosen people, and therefore superior to the local gentile population. They were concerned about being polluted by any contact with Gentiles, as Gentiles kept animals that they saw as unclean, like pigs and dogs, and did not follow their food or hygiene laws.

None the less, the Old Testament contains stories of faithful Gentiles who found favour with God. These righteous Gentiles included Naaman the leper who was healed through the ministry of the prophet Elisha, and Ruth who married Boaz after migrating to Israel with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. But generally, relations were strained between the Jews and the Canaanite Gentiles, who were the original inhabitants of the land.

Jesus was raised a Jew, and it seems that at least at the beginning of his ministry that he saw his ministry as being exclusively to the Jews. But this assumption is challenged in today's story. It's a story that reminds us of Jesus' humanity, in that he learned and grew during his ministry journey. He didn't start his ministry fully formed, but was taught by God in the encounters he had. It's a story that also, I believe, shows how God's Holy Spirit can work through unexpected people in unexpected ways.

In this encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, Jesus tries to stick with his understanding that his ministry is strictly to the Jewish people, but he encounters a very stubborn and determined mother who is desperate to save her child and will not give up because she has faith that Jesus can heal her child.

It is her audacious faith that refuses to accept his refusal to heal her child that helps to sway Jesus. He cannot but be impressed by her great faith, especially as many of the Jews did not believe, and even his disciples struggled at times to believe (after all Peter was rebuked for his lack of faith just before this incident). And maybe, it was also because of the incredible love that she has for her child. She puts up with his insults, and fights with every weapon she has, including a quick tongue, and doesn't give up. No wonder he heals her child.

It is one of the stories during Jesus' ministry that point to the change that will come at Easter when it becomes clear that Jesus' ministry is to the whole world and not just to the Jews. And it is one of the stories that speaks to us about the care we must take to not be prejudiced or set in our ways and not open to God's inclusive love for all of humanity. And we must be open to the possibility that we can learn from those who have different cultures or understandings or even different religions.

It questions, I believe, our assumptions, particularly as a nation, about who is deserving of help and who is not. What would Jesus think about our treatment, as a nation, of refugees who try to come to Australia by boat? Think of the Murugappan family from Sri Lanka who were living in Biloela in Queensland with their two little girls and contributing to the life of their community, but who are now living in isolation on Christmas Island at huge cost to the tax payer, but an even greater cost to their mental health. And think about the 65 asylum seekers living in a motel in Preston, squashed up with several in each room. They have been sent to Australia for medical care, but have not been allowed out in the fresh air for months on end, and many of them have complained that they are not getting the treatment they need.

And then there are all the migrant workers from the Pacific who are stuck in Victoria without work due to the COVID restrictions, and who are not eligible for Government support. Many of them would now be travelling to NSW or Queensland to harvest crops there, but they cannot get across the borders. They, like many others, are falling between the gaps.

And then there is the everyday racism experienced by many migrants of African or Asian background, and the racist insults still experienced all too often by those of Aboriginal descent. We may not be racist ourselves, but are we doing enough to support those who are experiencing racism? Or are we speaking out enough about the discrimination being experienced by Uighurs in China, Christians in Pakistan, Muslims in Myanmar, and other persecuted people?

If we think about others as inferior to us or less deserving than us it can lead to inhumane treatment. But the stories of Jesus' life and ministry over and over again see Jesus caring for and spending time with all sorts of people including those who were the outcasts of his day – like foreigners, publicans, prostitutes, and tax collectors

The story of Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman questions us in any encounters we have with people who are different to us in any way. How, for example, do we share God's love with the unemployed, with the migrant worker, with disenfranchised youth, and with the kids who don't know anything about God?

There is a challenge there for us. A challenge for us to be open to seeing in each person a person loved by God, and someone who may well be able to teach us something about love and faith. After all, even Jesus had to learn that his ministry was much broader than what he first assumed, and he was the one that we call The Light of the World.

We, his disciples are called to share that Light with the world.

I am reminded of a story I read about the teachings of a wise rabbi.

It goes- An ancient rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and day was on its way back.

“Could it be,” asked one student, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell if it is a dog or a sheep?”

“No,” answered the Rabbi.

“Could it be,” asked another, “when you look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?”

“No,” said the Rabbi.

“Well then, what is it?” his pupils demanded.

“It is when you look on the face of any man or woman and see that she or he is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot do this, then no matter what time it is, it is still night!”

May we be open to learning whatever it is that God is trying to teach us. And may we be open to sharing God’s love with all those we encounter so that we bring God’s light into the world. Amen.

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