



REFLECTION - "THESE I WILL BRING TO MY HOLY MOUNTAIN"

Matthew 15. 21- 31

Sermon with Revd. Deborah McVey preached on Sunday 16 August 2020

This week's lection readings underline God's inclusion and welcome for all people, especially those we consider strangers, foreigners, those different from ourselves. "These I will bring to my holy mountain," an intention woven through the Hebrew scriptures, supremely fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Those words of worship from Psalm 67 capture the same vision. It's a corporate song, not just of an individual. Starting with a prayer for God's grace and blessing for 'us', so that God's way be known to everybody, everywhere, the whole earth, all nations. This song, often used at weddings, asks for God's blessing through justice and authority, so that people and nations may be glad and multiply.

Blessing and justice hand in hand, the love of God and the human response of loving, in imitation of our Creator, we love as God first loves us. Isaiah echoes this theme. Justice, healing, deliverance for all, all who choose to live in godly ways, who hold fast to God's promises, all will be given an everlasting name and will be joined to God forever.

"These I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.",

This is a challenge. Think for a moment of those you find it hard to regard positively, let alone care for, let alone love. If we accept the truth that God cares for each one, then are we not supposed to have regard for them as well?

God wants us to reflect this love, how do we do it? When I hear news of those who cause harm to others, I wonder, can I sincerely pray, "May God be gracious to us all and bless us all? It's such unconditional love and care for every person; there is no way I can be let off the hook, out of God's generosity in blessing me I must be as generous as I can be in blessing others and giving, time and resources as well as of money, to enhance the wellbeing of others.

Today's gospel story follows Jesus' teaching in Jewish territory within earshot of the Pharisees on purity laws, ritual hand washing. The disciples needed an explanation, Jesus sums it all up in a most startling way, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, this is what defiles." Now Jesus moves on through the hill country into Tyre and Sidon, a Gentile region, maybe he's having time out, restoration between busy teaching and healing gatherings. He has this strange encounter with the un-named Canaanite woman, she recognises who Jesus is and his reputation as one who heals those who are sick, she comes to him in dire need. Her daughter is ill, possibly we would say psychotic, she is desperate for her to be well. Jesus does not behave as we might have expected. Not only the disciples, but even Jesus seem to ignore the woman's request to heal her daughter. She shouts, screams, "Have mercy on me." Jesus ignores her.

I wonder how I would react to someone running up to me shouting? Has that ever happened to you? I might well wish they would go away, I might feel embarrassed or fearful. The disciples are as desperate to send her away as she is to get Jesus to help her. Jesus gets into an exchange with her. In answer to his retort that he was "sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," she quiets herself and kneels at his feet. "Lord, help me." She is persistent, but calm. Maybe this causes him to pay attention? His mission is focused on the Jewish people, maybe it has to be at this stage; this is the perspective of the gospel writer Matthew. She simply asks for help. He makes the comment

about children's bread not being thrown to the dogs, which sounds insulting, although as a Gentile and a woman too, she may have been used to being insulted in this way. But kneeling she quietly answers Jesus with the truth that even dogs come under the table to pick up the crumbs, they eat exactly the same food as everyone else. She has a hunger for healing. This seems to get through to Jesus who praises her for her full-on faith and heals her daughter instantly.

Through this encounter, the woman pushes Jesus to expand his horizons and realize his life, the gospel, was for all; to appreciate from his Jewish cultural and faith perspective that the good news of his life, reason for being, is for the whole world. Most could not see these signs ahead of Jesus' death and resurrection; this woman did, whilst the disciples took time to grasp this truth. She not only glimpsed God's kingdom but was prepared to live it. Jesus may have been swayed by her absolute resolve and persistence. She trusted him to heal her daughter.

In the following passage (which the lection doesn't include) we see many more people healed of their afflictions. It is interesting that this all occurs after Jesus went up a mountain. These were not individuals who came to Jesus, they were brought by another person, each person placed at Jesus' feet, an echo of the Canaanite woman as she knelt. It was quite a crowd, and I am sure long after this occasion when families spoke of it, they described this mountain as a holy mountain, maybe too a 'house of prayer for all people.'

We know that all healing lies within the sphere of mystery, and that total healing may not happen this side of the grave, we wait in trust for the full shalom of heaven. Most of these healing stories illustrate how our own sense of wellbeing is inextricably linked with others. The daughter's healing would have multiplied the mother's sense of wellbeing. The struggle up the mountain on other's behalf would have brought wholeness to those caring for them. All together in sickness and in health we give praise to God, as this woman did, as this crowd did. "Come back," God says through the prophet Isaiah, "Come back home to me, 'these I will bring to my holy mountain.' Come back to this place, this way of living, this house of prayer for all people." "Maintain justice and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed." The word salvation can mean rescue, healing, shalom, peace. After Jesus' initial reluctance he poured out his healing crumbs to the mother, through her trust and belief, healing came to her whole household.

During this pandemic many have been 'away' from home, far from family, cut off from friends. This may have felt something like the experience of exile lived through by the Jewish people in Babylon at the time of the prophet Isaiah. We have lived through an experience of separation from all we once knew, even at home we feel separated from those physical places which once we travelled to with ease. Maybe we have felt a sense of separation from God without the encouragement and physical presence of the church community and corporate experience of worship. It is a strange experience to be preaching in an empty chapel, with just myself and David recording this. I'm so aware of the empty seats, once filled by countless generations of those who have inspired the faith of so many. But nothing is lost or wasted in God's divine economy, we are bound together in the communion of saints, and in this pandemic. "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed."

During this time of difficulty Isaiah's words remind us that whatever the circumstance we are called to live within God's shalom, by living like people who are already part of God's healing mysteries, already rescued? Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman of a different faith and culture unexpectedly opened up in him a new perspective on his own good news. She ministered to him. How willing are we to engage with those of other faiths and cultures to learn about them and to understand how their faith powers their life. Our visit to the Mosque was a good beginning. How willing are we to engage with those who are homeless; are we fearful of such encounters? Maybe we need to hear the stories of those amongst us who work with Street

Pastors and Nite Light and those people they assist. Jesus is found amongst people who are not like him, who have totally different backgrounds. He is found in those we would avoid. He is found everywhere; even amongst those who have committed heinous crimes who repent and believe his good news and change their lives from now on.

We present-day disciples might ask God what we need to learn from those who are strangers to us, to widen our

perspective of God's abundant mercy. For the Kingdom of God is wide and spacious and extends far beyond our ability to envision it. God will bring us all to God's holy mountain, God's house of prayer for all people.

We will sing a Taize song in a moment; the words echo today's scriptures: The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; come, Lord, and open in us the gates of your Kingdom. Some prefer to think of God's Kingdom as 'kin-dom' where all live together as kith and kin. When, like the Canaanite woman, we cry, "Lord, help me," God's may surprise us in the way we are helped by the Spirit of Jesus. How exciting to imagine all those different people we will meet one day on that holy mountain! And pray God will be glorified as we too respond in love! Amen.