

20th Sunday of Year

The second half of St Matthew's Gospel focusses on the Kingdom of God. Over recent weeks we have heard a number of parables explaining what the Kingdom of God is like and its importance. These will resume in a few weeks, focussing on the values of the Kingdom – what it means to live a Christian life – and will conclude with the coming of Christ as King and the Last Judgement. Today's Gospel invites us to reflect on who is called to be part of that kingdom.

When Our Lord sent out the disciples to preach about the Kingdom at the beginning of Chapter 10 he told them not to go to the pagans or Samaritans, but only to their fellow Jews. Today marks a change in direction and emphasis. Our Lord has left the mainly Jewish area of Gennesaret, and gone to the largely pagan area of Canaan, the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, in today's Lebanon. At first he refuses to speak to a local woman who comes to him for help. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." When she kneels before him, he refers to her in a less than complimentary way. To call someone a dog is a common term of abuse in the Middle East even today. They were regarded as unclean because they would eat anything, just as the pagans did, not just foods that were kosher. Jesus is moved not so much by her sharp piece of argumentation as by her faith and perseverance. "Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted."

It is not the purpose of the Father that the Kingdom should be confined to Jews. From this moment the way is open to pagans too, provided they have faith in Our Lord. The prophecy of Isaiah, contained in our first reading, is beginning to be fulfilled; "my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples." Over the next few weeks St Matthew will outline to us in more parables of the Kingdom what is really needed to be a child of the Kingdom, not externals such as circumcision, or observing the Jewish dietary laws, but living out the two great commandments of love of God and neighbour.

St Paul's Letter to the Romans was written before any of the Gospels, and makes the same point. It was a hard lesson for Saul, the former Pharisee to learn, that pagans would not only be admitted to the Kingdom, but ahead of most of the chosen people, and yet he is proud to have been chosen and sent as the apostles to the pagans. God's merciful love is all-embracing. He will welcome anyone who opens his heart to the message of the Gospel, and allows his life to be changed by the Holy Spirit.

Are we open to the working of God in unexpected places? As human beings we are inclined to erect barriers to protect ourselves and to see our neighbours as those who share our views. It is right that we should respect those who do not share our faith but not that we should be unconcerned or think that their beliefs or values do not matter. When we look around the world and we see countless millions who do not yet share our faith, we should see them not as a threat, or as people to be left to their own devices, but as people beloved by God, whom he wants to draw into his Kingdom, his network of love. If we live among those who do not yet share our faith, does this not mean that, like St Paul, we have been sent to reach out to them by our presence, human contact, example, and prayer? When we think about them our emphasis should not be on the fact that they do not share our faith but rather the 'not yet'. It is a challenge for us to work on and pray about.