

The 20th Sunday of Year A: Does God have ‘favourites’?

1st Reading: Isaiah 56:1+6-7: God’s Temple will welcome even ‘foreigners’;

2nd Reading: Romans 11:13-15+29-32: Paul’s hope for future reconciliation;

Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28: A pagan’s woman’s faith astonishes Jesus.

If you take “The Guardian” paper, and agree with its views, then you may not wish to read this Sunday’s gospel – it might give you apoplexy. Try it and see! On a more serious note, the subject matter of all three readings is difficult: the way religion can divide people - in extreme cases, causing hatred and bloodshed. It is tragic, because the word ‘religion’ originally meant ‘to bind together’ (not to divide!), and later, a sense of obligation – to God and others – within a system of belief. That being the case, what seems to have gone wrong?

If we look at the 2nd reading, then it may become clearer: Paul mentions Jews in contrast to what he calls “pagans” – he does not mean believers in false gods, but Gentiles (non-Jews) who had become Christians. As you may remember, strict Jews (as Paul used to be) saw Gentiles as effectively unclean: if a Jew touched one, he or she was ritually impure until they had washed. This dislike had grown worse over the centuries: violence occurred between Jews and Gentiles, based on their very different beliefs. For Paul (writing more in sorrow than in anger), the Jews’ rejection of Jesus as Messiah & Saviour meant that they were no longer “God’s people” the way they had once been. However, he looked forward to an eventual reconciliation between Gentile Christians and Jews, because “*God never takes back his gifts, or revokes his choices*”. Despite all the problems, the Jews still had a special place in God’s love for the human race.

This optimistic note is even in the 1st reading. This part of the book of Isaiah was probably written about 538 BC – just after the Jews had returned from exile. The tone was surprisingly tolerant. Far from being a severe rant against those outside their religion, the writer urged people in Jerusalem to welcome non-Jewish converts, because God “*will make them joyful in his house of prayer; their holocausts and sacrifices will be accepted on his altar. His house will be called ‘a house of prayer for all the peoples’.*”

Sadly, this sort of open welcome was not to last: as the years wore on, there was increasing conflict between Jews and pagans. By Our Lord’s time, the Pharisees had a policy of almost apartheid against Jews mixing with Gentiles. This is the background to the awful-sounding words of Jesus in the gospel. The story is easily told, and at first sight, it is very unflattering to Jesus. He was near the end of his public work in Galilee, and briefly entered the non-Jewish region of Tyre & Sidon (modern Lebanon). He met a Canaanite (pagan) woman, who asked him (quite loudly) to heal her daughter. She called him “Son of David”; this could mean that she saw him as the Jews’ Messiah; at the very least, she believed him to be a true member of the clan or tribe of David.

Jesus seems to have ignored her request, so the disciples urged him: “*Give her what she wants – she is shouting after us.*” (Their motive was less charity and more saving embarrassment.) Jesus answered that he was sent “*only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel*” Finally, the woman knelt at his feet, called him “Lord”, and begged him to help her. His famous (or infamous?) reply was: “*It is not fair to take children’s food and throw it to the house-dogs*”. This comment reflected a common Jewish view that they were “God’s children”, while the pagans were “dogs”. By ‘food’, he meant his own work among the Jews of Galilee. However, Jesus’ word for ‘dogs’ meant not wild animals, but pets, so the woman was probably less upset by this put-down than we might think. She said (with a certain amount of wit): “*Even house-dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master’s table*”. Jesus replied by praising her “great faith” and curing the daughter. He had probably been testing her faith all along.

What can we learn from these readings? I suggest that one thing is that we respect everyone’s search for truth. At the deepest level, we want to find what is true – the idea of a reality that is outside our own personalities and feelings – and let it affect how we behave ourselves, and how we treat each other. Not everyone will agree about what is “true”, and that is where the argument for religious liberty comes in. The sufferings of people in Nazi Germany and in post-war Communist European countries show the importance of this. However, it must be admitted that up till the 2nd Vatican Council, not all Catholic authorities were willing to grant freedom to other religions in the areas they controlled. The Declaration on Religious Liberty (December, 1965) was one of the last actions of the Vatican Council, and one of the most important. It saw religious freedom – and respect – as fundamental to human dignity.

But this does not mean that religious beliefs do not matter – that “they’re all about the same God-stuff”, as many modern cynics claim. In this Sunday’s gospel, Jesus got the pagan woman to proclaim her belief in him, by calling him “Lord” – a divine title. He praised her for her faith, so what she believed really did matter. St Paul’s whole life revolved round his search for religious truth: at first, within the Pharisees’ tradition of strict Judaism, then, after his conversion, as a Christian apostle offering the faith to an increasingly non-Jewish audience. But he never lost his affection for his former religion: this week’s reading shows his continual emotional attachment to it.

I think many find it difficult to get right the balance between searching for truth and respecting the rights of others who disagree with us about what the “truth” actually is, because this “truth” is about how we see our human lives, our world, and the future. The Vatican decree insisted that we have a duty to “seek the truth, embrace it and hold fast to it”. For each person to be able to do this in his or her own way needs a lot of tolerance and compromise. *Fr Jim Dunne.*