

**Trinity 13, Proper 15  
17 August 2008**

Isaiah 56:1,6-8

Psalms 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

There's always been a clear message in Holy Scripture that the message is for everybody. This is clear from today's Isaiah extract. It's the message of the entire story of Jonah – a kind of Groundhog day of Jonah doing it again until he gets it right and sees that Nineveh is to be spared. It's the message of the Epistle, though I find that difficult to decipher, but I think one of its messages is that we should extend to everybody else the charity that we have benefitted from. There are so many references in the Gospels to this same message: paying the workers, the wedding reception, to name but two.

But anyway, Jesus is clear that it is NOT a matter of doing things according to the letter of the law, but of using one's nous, judgment, compassion. And he illustrates this in a rather clever way. At first hearing, you might think that the Gospel is about healing, but if you look at it in context, you'll see it's not. It comes in amongst the healing of the crowd, and the story about Jesus going back to Nazareth where he is not appreciated. Just before this scene, Jesus has been back to the Temple at Nazareth, and the only thing that his own folk say is isn't that Joseph's son?

And if I had subjected you today to the long gospel you'd have heard that the woman's story comes after Jesus being absolutely vicious to the Pharisees and others who were being jobsworths and telling folk that they had to do it this way. It puts me in mind of my time in Wirksworth ...

So, woe to the jobsworths, the rule-keepers.

Remember that this is Matthew's Gospel, and that Matthew is writing his Gospel as a Jew and intending it as a means of attracting other Jews to the faith. It's not, like Luke's Gospel, aimed at non-Jews, but aims to emphasise the continuity from Abraham, Prophets, David, Jesus. Jesus the Jew. So the scene is set in the bit we hear for an exchange between Jesus the Jew and a Canaanite, an outsider, a nonJew, fertility cults, by no means someone that loyal Jew would normally talk to. Shocking that they should even converse. And shocking that the conversation should be about dogs. And here she is testing Jesus – in fact there seems to be a bit of mutual testing going on. Give us a bit of your chocolate. Why should I give it to you, you're from Staveley. We don't mix with folk from Staveley. Ah yes, but even folk from Staveley need to eat, otherwise how would you ever have someone to look down on.

Well maybe, but the message is clear. Jesus finds her faith unswayable. She is persistent. There's a message of us there. Nag, nag, nag – it works, I discovered that when I was a child. Too often, I give in. Hope, hope, hope. It works.

Trust, trust, trust – it's difficult when you're tired and worried, but this woman does not ask for a sign, nor does she ask for the best place in his kingdom. This woman of faith simply asks that her daughter to be made well again. An unselfish request.

It's the nonJews who seem to have more faith in Jesus than the Jews.

In the time of the Gospel, the divide between Jew and nonJew was almost as tangible as the wall that the modern day Israelis build between Jewish settlements and Palestinian settlements. Or the wall that still exists in Belfast. Or the wall that has been taken down in Berlin.

We need to remember all these things if we are not to fall into intolerance. God has no favourites. And draws no lines

So what relevance is this for us?

- We are told to buy local.
- Young men last night
- The church invents rules about who can and cannot have communion, be married in church, be baptized in church. Is this Gospel-based.
- The church invents rules about who can and cannot represent Christ at the altar.
- The church invents rules about who can and cannot read the lessons, serve in the sanctuary, take the collection.
- We seem always to be building fences, like the Israelis, the Berliners, the British in Belfast.
- We seem to like exclusive little clubs. I've been a member of several: country boy, grammar school boy, Oxbridge graduate, medical graduate, academic, church musician, and now the weirdest club of all so far. As time has gone on I've felt and seen the fences that these clubs erect between me and

the outside world: to be known as a member of a club might or might not change how I look at the world. But it certainly changes the way the world looks at me.

We need to be careful about the barriers we erect, and ask are they compatible with the Gospel teaching? ,Remember this, if we draw lines and erect fences, we'll find Christ with those on the other side.  
Ratzinger

#### Compassion

Those who are aware of their own imperfection are inevitably the most tender, compassionate, and understanding of others who are bruised or weak. It is the self-righteous who are not suited to God's purpose.

No man shall have the right to fix the boundary to the march of a Nation. No man has the right to say to his country, "Thus far shalt thou go and no further"