

20th Sunday In Ordinary Time - Year A – 20th August 2023

Today's readings are very *challenging* readings because they are about labels, identity, inclusion and exclusion. And for once, the one doing the excluding seems to be Jesus – the one *labelling* others as unworthy, unredeemable, the one who pushes a foreigner, as it were, to the side of the plate is our Saviour. And he does this in the face of the unanimous testimony of the other readings and the psalm, which are about inclusion, redemption available to all races. "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples" says Isaiah; "May your name be known among the nations" sings the Psalmist. And Paul, provocative as ever, glories in being the Apostle to the Nations, because it makes the Chosen People jealous that salvation is no longer exclusive to them.

But Jesus is resolutely elitist, even racist. A foreigner, a Canaanite, asks for his help and his first reaction is not to hear her. Only when the disciples insist does he even talk to her, rejecting her right to receive assistance, and then abusing her in terms deeply scandalous to the sensibilities of the time: "It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the houndedogs".

It is, in truth, hard to know what is going on here, without being present to hear the tone of voice in which this encounter was conducted. Was Jesus testing her? Was he joking with her? Or did he, in fact, reluctantly realise that his mission was not exclusive and limited – did that foreign woman teach him that lesson? We know that *something* happened that enabled Jesus to see her not as a label, an unwanted foreigner, but as a sister, a person who needed his love and his healing. Jesus, in the end, rejected not the woman, but the associations that popularly went with her race, her name, her appearance.

There could scarcely be a more appropriate gospel for our world at the moment. Conflicts, war, death – all motivated by labels, by *hatred* for that which is different, which of course means **fear** of that which is different. What a travesty of love, and therefore of God, to seek to confine love, dole it out only to those who match your own lifestyle and beliefs, to confer personhood only upon those who are from your tribe. What a blasphemy to consider those who are different as worse than dogs, with no rights to justice, security, freedom to worship; to deal with them not with truth, but with partiality.

We demonize those dispensers of terror – I think rightly – in our modern world who *label* those different from them, and seek to eliminate them. But here's a thing: we *only* have the right to *do* that if we ourselves refuse to label people, if our reaction to them is based not on what they are *called*, but on who they are, if we ourselves are willing to step across ancient barriers of division and difference.

Our opposition to the wars and injustice should be based **not** first of all not in our fear of terror and its consequences for our security, but in our assertion of the universal brother and sisterhood of humanity. We will not let people be labelled. We will not allow the race, or religion, or colour of skin, or way of living to determine their right to live, or not to live. We have been there before. Christ's message, so very relevant for our world today, is that in him we are one before God, that there is no highway to heaven for one particular group, and that to destroy those we label as different not only murders them, but murders our own sheer humanity.