

HOMILY – 20TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – 20 AUGUST 2017

Theme: ‘God is a God of all tribes, peoples and nations’.

In today’s Gospel from Matthew, Jesus encounters a woman desperate for help. (Her daughter is possessed by some terrible possession or affliction). The woman is a Canaanite, in other words, a foreigner, not an Israelite, of a different religion as well.

Up till this point, she had no reason to seek out Jesus. She was caught up in her own life, her own culture and pagan religion. For all we know, a good hardworking woman and mother. In all probability, it was Jesus who was venturing into non-Jewish territory, about 100 miles north of Jerusalem. He ventures far and wide. But she heard on the grapevine that this miracle worker, this healer, was in her area. A bit like an opportunist who doesn’t quite know what to expect but is willing to take risks to get when they want. Desperate situations equals desperate measures. This shows how much she loves her daughter.

In Jewish law, it is normal that Jews only acknowledge fellow Jews on the highway of life. Non-Jews are ignored and treated as a potential threat. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, where it highlights that people of different tribes/cultures don’t associate with each other.

So, the Canaanite woman is being very brave in calling out to Jesus, the Jew, pleading for help. Because Jesus is God, he knows he will help her but beforehand, he tests out her determination to be granted a healing for her daughter. He wants her to express how much she trusts him to do what is required. This little event shows that Jesus is not bigoted/bitter but also that as Son of David, a Jewish title for The Messiah. He is really The Messiah for all nations, not just the Jews.

In this very Jewish of Gospels, Jesus highlights that He is called to unite people of all nations, under the one true God. That faith is not a tribal or national thing, it is a universal belief.

I heard a funny story recently about some Polish people going to Mass on St Patrick’s Day and a bystander in the street in Broxburn remarked, ‘I didn’t know that the Polish come from Ireland too’!!

Jesus, after the resurrection, sends his Apostles out to teach all nations and baptise them in His name. The revelation too is that there is only one God and He, Jesus, is the Second person of the Trinity. There isn’t a Protestant Jesus, a Catholic Jesus, a Baptist Jesus. There is One Jesus Christ, who came to establish one faith on earth, one true Church or assembly which subsists very beautifully in the Catholic Church. But also importantly, elements of the True Church subsist in other traditions. So what God has united, Man must not divide. Our collective mission is therefore to unite. To unite people of faith in the One True God. It is extremely challenging and it will take much time and effort. But look how far we have come in the past 100 years. 50 years ago, you would never have imagined Catholics, Jews and Muslims sharing in prayer at the Cenotaph but now it happens. To get people in different religions to love each other is a sign of the Resurrection.

It is the ungodly or those with a distorted image of God who seek to generate hatred towards those of other religions. Terrorism is a rejection of the path to peace. Ironically, the Holy Land, with its present tensions and hatred, is the microcosm of what is happening throughout the world. The greater compliment that Jews and non-Jews in Palestine could make, would be to live in harmony with each other.

As St John says, 'if we declare faith in God but hate our neighbours because of their religion then we are possible a hypocrite.

As Pope Francis said recently, the world needs mercy like never before, Muslims and Christians, Jews and Palestinians, North Koreans and Americans, Black and White, Rich and Poor. The path to mercy is enhanced greatly when, like Jesus we reach out to those in need, with no regard for their religion, status or nationality. The one who we help today could be our saviour tomorrow.

As the Samaritan women at the well gave Jesus a drink, so Jesus gave her the water of everlasting life!

Help us Lord not to become bigoted, bitter or divisive.

Amen