

“Jesus the outsider reminded of his purpose” a sermon based on Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 and Matthew 15:21-28 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 16 August 2020.

There has been much discussion about the extent to which COVID-19 will change how we live. Can the pandemic prompt us to live more justly and compassionately? Will it help us care and connect more? Many commentators are trying to understand what is happening in terms of generational shifts. The conformism of the 1950s that moved into the freedom and liberation of the 1960s, that promised a more open society. Such a society also seemed to produce an individualism, that became more extreme, embodied in economic approaches that emphasised individual opportunity and individual achievement. Some suggested that 60 years of such individualism weakened our sense of community and our capacity to act together. Such individualism became so troubling that a quiet rebellion began to emerge, a rebellion that began to emphasise connection and interdependence and community - an emphasis fed by the need to address major global challenges like climate change and the relocation of millions of people. So, perhaps, COVID-19 is not bringing fresh change, but deepening an emerging rebellion, highlighting interdependence and the need for collaboration.

I have noticed these commentators make no reference to the influence of indigenous cultures, with their emphasis on community and connecting with the earth, with each other and with Atua. I wonder if that has been part of why New Zealanders have been able to act together better. We have learned that trust is precious, trust in each other to respect the safety of the other, trust in government to lead sensibly, trust in scientific advisors. What is our role as Christians in this time? What might our faith contribute? We have a store of wisdom and centuries of experience that speak of community, of how community is built, and what community looks like. We have a resource of stories that inspire inclusion and proclaim equity, highlighting the plight of people who are vulnerable. And we have a living Christ whose Spirit empowers us to live his way day by day.

Let's dig into the wisdom of the ages in the spirit of Christ. The story of the Canaanite woman. A startling story because it seems to present a misogynistic and racist Jesus. Jesus was entering foreign territory, passing from his Jewish homeland of Galilee to the predominantly Gentile non-Jewish territory of Tyre and Sidon. This is the only encounter Jesus has with a non-Jew apart from the centurion whose servant is paralysed. In this era, a close encounter with a foreigner, especially a foreign woman in a public meeting, would defile Jesus. Just before this reading, Jesus has taught his disciples that only what proceeds from the heart can defile. And in this territory, Jewish people were poorer and less numerous than Gentiles. So in this encounter Jesus is the outsider, the foreigner and the woman is the insider, the one who knows. She was desperate. Her daughter was unwell. She had heard that Jesus healed. And we know how deeply compassionate Jesus could be. Yet when she cried out Jesus did not answer her at all saying that he had only come for Jewish people, not Gentiles. So she knelt down and asked again – "Please help me."

And in what seemed an utterly ethnocentric comment, Jesus said - but what is for Jewish people is not meant for Gentiles. Then comes her winning retort – "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She was effectively saying - "Well, you might save the food for Jewish people but can you at least give me crumbs." And so she converts Jesus, opens him out, turns him around, reminds him of who he is and the scope of his calling. "You are Lord, the son of David." And in that moment, through her intervention, we see a door open in how we can relate to God, a door that all we Gentiles have been able to walk through ever since.

In this foreign land with who was for him a foreign woman, with strict rules of separation, when Jesus was the outsider, his eyes are opened to the breadth of what he is called to. The reign of God excludes no one. This is the gospel, and it's been there for a while. It's there in Isaiah – "For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel. I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Let me turn quickly to speak of the church. One of the saddest outcomes of secularism, the separating of the realm of religion from the wider society, is congregations which have turned in on themselves and focused on the people who already belong. Forty years ago when I was first a minister, I had on average 35 funerals and 16 weddings a year. At least half of those were in the church building. So the congregation never imaged, the church building was their preserve. As that interaction has dramatically dropped, I have noticed congregations imagine that they own their building, that it is for them, and what is said of the building can also be said of other aspects of the church's life. We are only stewards, managers. The words of Isaiah are forever – my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. And when the society around us tries to build moats, cutting us off, we need to keep filling them in, so people come and go, freely and our calling is to express the overflowing love of God, called grace. Even when we feel out of place, foreigners here.

Over the last week, two groups have thanked us for being able to use “your building”, and have been surprised when I said – it's not our building. It's your building. We are looking after it for you. And so we stand against our society's ideology of individualistic private ownership. We gain comfort from a Jesus who himself needed to be converted to such openness. He needed help to see his bias. And it happened when he was reminded of who he was and what he was for, just as we need constant reminding that the house of God is a house of prayer for all peoples. The New Testament describes a journey of people learning how to be open, of being turned from ourselves, from confined company, towards the inclusion and honouring of all God's people, continually overcoming prejudice. What a gift the life of Jesus. What a gift the Canaanite woman.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

*Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace*



Knox Church

449 George Street

Dunedin

New Zealand

www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net