

## **Sermon for Sunday 20 August 2023**

**Genesis 45: 1 – 15; Romans 11: 1 – 2a, 29 – 32;  
Matthew 15: 21 – 28**

### **Who's in and who's out?**

Who's in and who's out? It's a very important question if you are being chosen for any kind of team sport. Our readings today all touch on this question.

First, in our reading from Genesis - Joseph has been made an outsider by his brothers who – as we heard last Sunday – had sold him into slavery to a passing trader. They literally cast him out. But Joseph has become very much a trusted insider in his adopted country. Right at the heart of government in the mighty power of Egypt. Joseph is very clear that God has planned all of this so that he may save his family from the famine which threatens the whole region. So in a complete reversal and with extraordinary grace, Joseph now welcomes his brothers, who are now the outsiders, into his own new country.

Then, in our passage from Romans Paul continues to wrestle with the fact that most of his fellow-Jews, God's chosen people, have not accepted Jesus as their Messiah. They have remained outside the new movement. Why has God seemingly hardened their hearts when so many non-Jews are accepting the message? Those who were once outside – the Gentiles - are now welcomed in to God's kingdom. But so many of those who used to be inside – the Jews - choose to remain outside. Paul can only conclude that God's plan must be that all have been caused to be disobedient so that God may ultimately show mercy to all.

Our Gospel story is about an outsider, the Canaanite woman. It takes place in the region of Tyre and Sidon – cities of traditionally evil reputation, and an area where good Jews would not venture for fear of contamination. Immediately before the story, Jesus has had an argument with the Pharisees because his disciples were not carrying out the ritual washing

before eating. During that argument, Jesus says that it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of the mouth, that is the evil desires of the heart, as expressed by our words. Just before this argument, Jesus has been healing the sick. It seems quite possible that he has deliberately gone into this wild territory to have some peace and quiet, some respite from the crowds, the teaching and healing and the arguments with his own people.

But he's not to be left in peace because he's accosted by this woman who shouts after him and who is definitely an outsider. Jesus at first ignores her. She is a Canaanite woman, from an ethnic group long feared and despised by Jews as worshippers of other gods. Moreover, she is shouting at him, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me." Although what she says also shows that she recognises who He is. When Jesus does respond He first confirms to the disciples that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. Anyone else is outside His scope. But the

conversation with the woman continues. She makes a clever reply, which impresses Him. Her faith impresses Him too, perhaps reminding Him of His astonishment at the faith of the centurion, another outsider, whose servant He had healed (Matthew 8: 5f). In the end Jesus relents. He will have dealings with the outsider after all. He heals her daughter.

Three very different passages. But all on the theme of outsiders and insiders. So, what does all of this say to us? Here are some thoughts that came to me. You might have others.

From Paul's message to the Romans, there's a warning that insiders can become outsiders. Any of us can, if we choose, harden our hearts against God and refuse to listen.

More positively, outsiders are welcomed in. Most, probably all of us, would not be part of God's people today if the Gentiles, the non-Jews, had not been welcomed into God's family.

From our Gospel reading we learn that no one is beyond the reach of God's love and compassion. Those who call out to God in desperation are heard.

Moving on to think some more about outsiders in particular - here are some things that occurred to me.

Outsiders may bring us gifts. Joseph, the outsider, brought enormous benefits to Egypt both because of his ability to interpret dreams and because of his administrative skills. The Pharaoh was wise enough to see this and give him the opportunity to use his gifts.

Outsiders can demand our attention. They may be noisy or turn up at an inconvenient moment – as happened to Jesus with the Canaanite woman.

Outsiders may draw out our compassion too, as we find they have needs that we are called and able to meet.

Outsiders may teach us new things or new ways of doing things. Things that we would not have dreamed about in our wildest imaginings.

Outsiders can be God's way of breaking in on us, disrupting us and encouraging us to change.

And finally, and most important of all. We were all outsiders once, but thanks be to God that he has rescued us through Jesus and brought us home.

Amen

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