

When I was at St Oswald's Parkside, I wandered into church one day to collect a couple of pew sheets for parish visiting and I bumped into an Indian man and his young son. The man was neatly dressed in a suit and tie and most polite. His son had a lovely smile. He told me that he had just moved into the area nearby the church and wanted to have a look. I shook them both by the hand and welcomed them. The man was very grateful and then told me that his family were Hindu, but that when he was about to choose his new home, he had a vision that there was a 'holy place' nearby and sure enough, there it was. He was so thrilled to come inside and look around. He insisted on giving me an offering and then the two of them left.

I later reflected that even someone from another world faith, another religion, felt welcome. I could picture the smile on Jesus' face; I gave thanks for his all-inclusive love and prayed that we all might imitate it. I was also reminded that Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, read the Sermon on the Mount nearly every night for inspiration. And when in South Africa about to be bashed again by white pro-apartheid authorities he simply smiled and said, "There's room for all of us".

In today's gospel, Jesus has a powerful encounter with a Canaanite woman as he travels the district of Tyre and Sidon in the northern Roman province of Syria. This woman is outside the Jewish faith. She has heard that Jesus is a holy man, a man with healing powers. Even though she is not a Jew, she will do anything to have her tormented daughter healed and she cries out to this man whom she calls "Lord, Son of David", the correct messianic term. Jesus' disciples urge him to disregard her shouting and he at first informs her that he is on a particular mission to Jews who have strayed from the faith. Jesus also knows that this person has two things that are not in her favour: she is a woman and she is not a Jew. Jesus refers to the 'children' of Israel as against the 'dogs' outside. It sounds extremely harsh; it was: women were considered as dogs, even more, women outsiders. This is the enemy. Go back to where you came from! The woman is not deterred. A gender revolution is at hand in a patriarchal system. An inclusive revolution is at hand too. Jesus is astounded by her persistence and her counter-cultural response. Her daughter is healed instantly. This is powerful religious commentary. The woman and her daughter seem like unusual suspects in God's plan: in fact, they are catalysts for non-violent Kingdom and World upheaval.

The woman's persistence inspired Thomas Cranmer's *Prayer of Humble Access* many centuries later. The woman is aware, like that Indian Hindu man I met, that even people outside the faith can get a sniff, a few crumbs of the goodness that can be found. There are other instances where Jesus encounters Gentiles who have the same innocent faith, like the Roman centurion whose servant is healed in Chapter 8 of Matthew. Indeed, it is the combination of these two healings of Gentiles that gives rise to Cranmer's words, "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy (your) table, but thou art (you are) the same Lord whose property (nature) is always to have mercy".

But remember, WE are the outsiders, the Gentiles, who by God's grace alone in the all-inclusive action of Christ and his missionary apostles have been *found worthy* of the Kingdom of Heaven. I have rearranged the wording of Cranmer in a *Prayer of Confident Approach*, which I have shared with our Wednesday congregation. It is St Paul, in Romans 11, who addresses the Gentiles and warns them not to take for granted their inclusion in this wonderful plan of God. They have only

been grafted to the vine because of Israel's unbelief, so therefore they should be so proactive in their inclusion of others and zealous in gospel proclamation as a result. Paul is effectively saying, "you take your Christianity for granted at your peril; bear fruit for the Kingdom!"

We all need to ask ourselves, "Who is the real enemy?" We can get threatened by the different, the unusual, the marginal, can't we? The real enemy actually lies within: within you and within me. Most of us need healing and reconciliation within. We are *all* God's unusual suspects. But we are also a chosen race, and a royal priesthood called by God out of darkness into light to proclaim God's mighty work. There are more tormented, estranged and alienated lives to touch; some might fill these pews, others might not, but all are people to welcome into the network of those who have been given the secrets and treasures of the Kingdom. And it all begins with our own personal faith-life integration- loving the enemy within.

SONG TO MY OTHER SELF

*Over the years I have caught glimpses of you in the mirror, wicked;
in a sudden stridency in my own voice, have heard you mock me;
in the tightening of my muscles felt the pull of your anger
and the whine of your greed twist my countenance;
felt your indifference blank my face when pity was called for.
You are lurking under every kind act I do, ready to defeat me.*

*Lately, rather than drop the lid of my shock over your intrusion,
I have looked for you with new eyes
opened to your tricks, but more,
opened to your rootedness in life.
Come, I open my arms to you also, once-dread stranger.
Come, as a friend I would welcome you to stretch your apartments
within me from the cramped to comforting side.
Thus I would disarm you.
For I have recently learned, learned looking straight into your eyes:
The holiness of God is everywhere. Elsie Landstrom, 'Inward Light'*