

Lectio Divina – 20th Sunday of the Year A

Matthew's Gospel (in brief)

- Composed between 80-90 CE
- Author is anonymous, but named as 'Matthew the tax collector' by later tradition.
- Written in scholarly 'synagogue' Greek.
- Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
- Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: "When Jesus had finished...."):
 1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
 2. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
 3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
 4. 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
 5. 4th: 18 Community Discourse
 6. 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
- May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
- Jesus first words are 'to fulfil all righteousness'.
- A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
- 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
- The only Gospel to explicitly mention the 'Church' – Matthew is theologian of the church.
- Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
- Names Jesus as 'Messiah' at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 15:21- 28 - things to notice

- Jesus leaves Gennesaret (North eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum) and travels all the way to Tyre and Sidon – about 80 kilometres! He is in pagan territory.
- He encounters a Canaanite woman – she is doubly marginal: a woman and a foreigner (a non-Israelite). The word Canaanite was often used as the opposite of Israelite.
- 'Son of David' – don't take this to mean that the woman recognises Jesus as the Messiah. 'Son of David' maybe only a reference to Jesus being dressed like a Jew or perhaps she has somehow heard of Jesus' reputation as a healer. In any case, remember that Matthew is telling a story not relaying an historical event.
- The woman makes her request for healing for her daughter.
- Jesus snubs her (answers her not a word).
- The woman must have made quite a commotion for the disciples to beg Jesus to 'give her what she wants'.
- Jesus replies that he is 'sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel' – a repeat of his earlier statement in Matthew 10:6 when Jesus commissions the disciples to 'go only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel'. He does not want to exceed what he feels is the mission given him by God.
- The woman comes up and kneels in front of Jesus probably to stop Jesus in his tracks as a gesture of pleading. "Lord, help me."
- Jesus makes an uncharacteristically hard and sarcastic reply about taking food from the children (Israelites) and giving it to the house dogs (a racial slur for Canaanites). His response is uncalled for, but also explains Jesus' view of his mission.
- The woman's retort shows a couple of things. Firstly, she is no pushover (like the Samaritan woman) and secondly, she is aware she has no rights, no claim on Jesus. Nevertheless, she will fight to get what she wants – healing for her daughter.
- The woman twists the imagery Jesus uses to her advantage and bests him in the debate.
- Jesus affirms the boldness of her belief and faith in his power to heal. She is the only person in Matthew's Gospel said to have 'great faith'. Her wish is granted.

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading is from the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah (56:1, 6-7). In the reading God assures foreigners (non-Israelites) of a warm welcome in God's house of prayer. Their sacrifices will be welcome, their integrity will be recognised. Israelites must have a care for justice and act with integrity.

Reflection

Today's Gospel marks a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. He sees himself as sent 'only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. That is, to those who were deemed sinners because they could not keep the Law of Moses and were considered beyond the care and concern of God.

The story centres around a confrontation between Jesus and a pagan (Canaanite) woman.

Firstly, Jesus ignores her altogether. Then, because the woman is making such a racket, the disciples ask him to give her what she wants. Jesus refuses. The woman approaches him directly and asks for help. He refuses again, quoting an ancient popular racial slur against the Canaanites. His words are harsh and demeaning, but the woman persists. She defeats Jesus' argument with her quick thinking and by twisting his own imagery in her favour. She points out to him that everyone, not just Israelites, can share in the goodness of God. Jesus opens his eyes to a broader, more inclusive, understanding of his mission. Admiring her sense of faith, Jesus tells the woman that her daughter is healed.

St Matthew uses this story about Jesus and the woman to answer the question about who belongs in the Kingdom of God – who are the insiders and who are the outsiders? In terms of the story not only Israelites, but all who come with faith, are part of the Kingdom. The first reading from the Prophet Isaiah makes the same point: God's house is a house for all the peoples.

Matthew's early Christian community is struggling with accepting some non-Jews wanting to join them. Just as Jesus (the ultimate insider) moves past his own prejudices, so the members of the Kingdom and the Church must move past theirs' so that God's house of prayer will be a place of justice and integrity for all the peoples; a house from which God's salvation and healing flows.