

Homily. 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Year. A. 19/20 August 2023.

In the disturbing gospel we've heard it's a fair question to ask; Was Jesus prejudiced in his dealings with the indigenous Canaanite woman? The short answer to this is that initially, Yes, he was. She was descended from one of the original inhabitants of the land that the Jewish people had taken from her ancestors when they'd entered the country around 1200 years before Jesus encounter with her.

The Jewish people's understanding was that Israel was the land God had given to them and to their ancestors. They'd come to see themselves as special, as chosen by God, gifted with God's promises, laws and covenant. This inevitably led them to look down on the Canaanite 1st peoples and others who weren't in their group. It's this same process of cultural prejudice that led the USA to belief in its 'manifest destiny' to rule over and control North America and much else besides; the same as led us to adopt prejudicial and unjust policies when dealing with Australian indigenous peoples, the now defunct 'White Australia Policy' and which got us to think of multiculturalism as a way of integrating migrants into our dominant culture in every way except for their food and music.

Brought up with his 1st Century Jewish view point of specialness and privilege Jesus, at this time in his mission and as he said, thought that his ministry was only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. His encounter with this smart, persistent and faith filled Canaanite woman challenged and changed all of that, and much to the better for all of us.

Her intervention out of deep concern for her daughters well being and her great faith that Jesus, a Jew, a Rabbi and a male could help stirred Jesus compassion. Moreover, the wit, persistence and love of this woman from the other camp, from outside of the Jewish pale, awoke his insight into God's will for him and God's greater plan for humanity.

This bigger, wider, universal plan had already been hinted at in the Jewish scriptures as the Isaiah reading says when it foresees a home and house of prayer in Jerusalem for all peoples of integrity, faith and good will. Through his encounter Jesus was able to critique and overcome his innate cultural bias because this house-dog, this other, this woman opened his heart and mind to recognise God present, alive and working in her and in all good persons no matter their culture, race or ethnic history.

What we learn from this is that all of us have prejudices, often unrecognised but working away within us nevertheless. This is fully human and perfectly normal. When the light about these biases switches on in us, this is a joyful moment of grace, of God's gift touching us, just as it was for Jesus. Our chance to reflect and change for the better and broader has arrived and we ought seize the opportunity as Jesus did.

After all, it's not as if Christ went on to die for us when we were already perfect. Rather, what proves God's love for us is that he died for us when we were still sinners, still at odds with and far from God. Having died to bring us to rights with God is it likely that Christ would now fail to save us? To this question God's word and salvation history gives a resounding NO!