

Sermon for Proper 15A

The Text: Matthew 15:10-28

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I expect that almost everyone knows the nursery rhyme “Old Mother Hubbard”, about an old woman with nothing in her cupboard. She had nothing – not even a bone for her dog. We get the image of someone weak and destitute with nothing to share.

What a contrast such scarcity and poverty makes with the riches that God freely makes available. We often hear of God's abundance. We hear of the abundance of God's mercy and undeserved favour towards us and towards all people. We hear again and again of God's boundless love, such that God forgives all our sin for Jesus' sake.

It's most certainly true that God is rich in favour and mercy. God desires and works for our good and the salvation of all. God is generous and satisfies all of our needs. These are among the great truths of the Christian faith which are proclaimed to us day after day, week after week. Do you remember hearing about Jesus' presence with us always, keeping us safe in the storms of life? Or hearing how Jesus fed thousands of people in the wilderness and had twelve baskets full of leftover food after the needs of the people were satisfied? We're taught that we can trust God to supply all of our needs. These stories help us grow in faith so that we can discern God's gracious activity in every moment of our lives.

Time after time, God's word declares that He is not a God of scarce and limited resources. Are we sometimes tempted to imagine that God only has limited blessings for a limited group of people? In reality, God loves all people and wants to share life, fellowship and companionship with them. That's why God made us. It's simply wrong to think that some people are automatically favoured by God, and that the rest are automatically out of favour with God. The readings we heard today make that point quite clear.

Listen to the Apostle Paul's profound conclusion on this line of thinking, spelling out quite plainly that God doesn't automatically favour one group over another. He wrote this to a largely non-Jewish congregation:

“Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.” (Romans 11.30-32)

His point is that God is merciful to all, has unmerited favour on all, whether Christian, or Jew or whatever, because we were all imprisoned in disobedience to God.

From the Apostle Paul we learn that God's plan is to show mercy to all people. God is working hard to create and sustain a group of people who can live in God's mercy and favour. God does that in order to reach the rest of the world with love and mercy. Long ago, God chose the Israelites, Abraham's descendants, for this purpose. The idea was that God would bless them to bring blessing to all the nations. The Apostle Paul noted that that didn't work out so well, and now God's plan continues through those who are in Christ, like the Christians in Rome and the Christians scattered throughout Australia, and the world, today. God has shown us mercy as part of a plan that brings God's mercy to all people. From Isaiah we heard *"Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."* (Is 56:8)

Today's gospel lesson teaches us a similar lesson. First, we heard that people aren't defiled and cut off from God by external things. Jesus said that it's what comes out the mouth which defiles. He was indicating that what comes out of our mouths tends to be symptomatic of the state of our hearts, of our relationship to God. We've already heard from the Apostle Paul that we all start off imprisoned in disobedience to God. The point is that God is overflowing in mercy, not that any of us has earned that mercy. The second part of the gospel lesson told us about a woman who understood that painfully well.

We heard about an anguished mother, who showed such an amazingly strong and unflinching trust in God's favour, mercy, and abundance that it couldn't be squashed down and kept out of sight. There were several things at work which could have undermined her trust in God's goodness and mercy. First, her daughter was suffering. She cried out that her daughter was being tormented by a demon. The woman was in great distress and suffering, because of her daughter. Added to that was the fact that she was not a member of the Jewish people. She was a descendant of the Canaanites, so she couldn't claim the promises of God which had been given to Abraham. Yet, in spite of her situation, she trusted in God's generous mercy and cried out to Jesus for help.

If her situation wasn't hard enough already, the responses of Jesus and the disciples were not encouraging. It was as if everything was working against her to crush her faith down into the ground. The initial response from Jesus and the disciples was very much in keeping with what foreigners could expect from Jews. Jews who heard this, and very likely Matthew's original audience, would not have noticed anything odd or offensive in what was said.

Yet the woman's faith kept shining through, even while she was treated like a dirty foreigner. At first, her plea for help seemed to fall on deaf ears, as though she didn't exist. Then, when her cries for help annoyed the disciples, they asked Jesus to send her away. She experienced rejection on top of rejection. When Jesus told his disciples that his mission was to the Jews, she still pleaded at his feet. Then Jesus addressed her directly with the common view that God's blessings were for the Jews and weren't to be wasted on unworthy foreigners. Rather than being offended at these hard words, she pounced on them and claimed the overflow of God's abounding riches and favour as her own.

In spite of all the odds, the faith of the woman couldn't be crushed into the ground. It kept finding a way out, like when we try to hold water in our hands. The faith of the woman was wonderful and irrepressible. It simply couldn't be beaten down. Why? Because her faith was about God and not about herself. Her faith didn't depend on who she was, on her heritage or worthiness. Her faith was an unshakeable trust in God's character. Somehow, she was convinced that God is faithful and loving to all people. Somehow, she was convinced that God abounds in mercy and favour, such that even the crumbs and overflow of God's goodness and mercy are enough for all people.

Her trust in God's goodness and abundance was not misplaced. Jesus suddenly praised her great faith. In response to her plea, and so that we might know that her belief was right, her daughter was healed instantly.

This woman of Canaanite descent shows us how to trust the one true God, expecting mercy and blessing.

May the Spirit work in us, so that as we hear of the faith of this woman we are drawn into a deeper trust in God's faithfulness, favour, mercy and abundance. God leads us to life and blessing so that we can lead others into the life and blessing of God's healing presence. We experience mercy so that we can show God's mercy. We're forgiven so that we can forgive. We're made rich so that we can share God's riches.

The woman showed us that the God we trust is no Old Mother Hubbard. Rather we trust a God of overflowing riches, mercy, and favour. Even the crumbs from God's table are abundant. God has riches for us and for all. Together with the Apostle Paul, we trust in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit who desires to be merciful to all.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.