

20th Sunday (A)

- Mahatma Gandhi tells how, during his student days, he read the Gospels & saw in the teachings of Jesus a possible answer to one of the great problems facing India - the caste system.
- Seriously considering becoming a Christian, Gandhi went to a Christian church one Sunday morning intending to speak with the minister.
- But as he entered, the usher refused to give him a seat & told him to go & worship with his own people.
- Gandhi left the church & never returned. He later said, *"If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu."*
- Whether every detail of the story is historically certain, its message remains confronting: **sometimes the greatest obstacle to faith is not what Christians believe, but what Christians do.**
- The belief that God's blessings are somehow limited to people of certain nationalities, cultures or religions has been around for a very long time.
- It was certainly present in the society in which Jesus grew up, & sadly, it persists today.
- The readings this Sunday invite us to recognise the contrast between **triumphalism & embrace, exclusion & inclusion.**
- Triumphalism says: *"We are right & they are wrong; we are better than they are."*
- It divides the world into "us" & "them" & assumes that God is somehow more on our side than theirs.
- Religious people are not immune from this temptation - Catholics have sometimes thought this way about Protestants; Christians have sometimes thought this way about Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists & others.
- And every religious tradition can fall into the same temptation.
- Triumphalism can even enter the Church quietly: *we have the truth, we have the sacraments, we have the authority, we know what is right.*
- But when that happens, religion can become less about encountering God & more about protecting our own sense of superiority; this is why Pope Francis so frequently challenged clericalism & religious privilege.
- The alternative is the spirit of **welcome**; it says: *We are all brothers & sisters, one human family under the loving parenthood of God.*
- Being chosen by God does not mean being better than others.
- Being Catholic does not give us ownership of God.
- Faith is not a badge of superiority; it is an invitation to humility, gratitude & service. That is the message running through today's readings.
- Isaiah speaks of God's house as a *"house of prayer for all peoples."*
- Paul speaks of God's mercy extending to all; & Matthew gives us this extraordinary encounter between Jesus & a Canaanite woman.
- She is a foreigner, a woman & a pagan - an outsider to the religious community of Jesus & his disciples; yet she comes to Jesus with the desperate cry of a mother: *"Lord, help me."*

- At first, Jesus appears to reinforce the boundaries of his own religious tradition, but she refuses to walk away; she challenges him; she persists.
- And her persistence opens something profound.
- Jesus recognises her faith & responds to her need.
- It is one of those remarkable Gospel moments in which **an outsider becomes the one who teaches the insiders something about faith.**
- The Gospel reminds us that God is always larger than the boundaries we create around God.
- Sometimes God encounters us through the very people we are tempted to exclude. That is an important message for our world.
- We continue to witness the terrible consequences of hatred between religious, ethnic & national groups: innocent people are killed, displaced & demonised simply because of who they are or what they believe.
- And we do not have to look only to distant conflicts.
- In Australia, fear of foreigners, refugees & asylum seekers can sometimes be very close to the surface.
- Particularly in times of terrorism or social anxiety, there is a danger that we begin to categorise & demonise whole groups of people because of the actions of a few, but the Gospel calls us to resist that temptation.
- It doesn't mean ignoring genuine dangers or abandoning the need for justice & security, but Christians are called to something deeper: to refuse to dehumanise people because they belong to another culture, religion or nation.
- The Eucharist we celebrate today makes this Gospel visible.
- We come from different backgrounds, carrying different stories & experiences, yet we gather around one table & receive the one bread of Christ.
- The Eucharist therefore sends us beyond ourselves; it calls us to become a community where people encounter - not our superiority or judgement - but the mercy & welcome of Christ.
- Perhaps the question for us today is not simply, *"Who belongs?"* but **"Whom might we still be keeping outside?"**
- Who have we judged too quickly? Whose story have we never taken the time to hear? Who might experience our parish not as a spiritual home, but as a place where they remain on the margins?
- Our vocation is to make the face of Christ visible; to reveal rather than conceal the authentic face of God.
- So let us help one another become more loving, forgiving, gentle, compassionate & humble. Let our parish become a place where "us" & "them" gives way to the deeper truth that **we are all children of God.**
- And may we truly mean the prayer with which we began this Mass:
- *"Almighty God, ever-loving Father, your care extends beyond the boundaries of race & nation to the hearts of all who live. May the walls which prejudice raises between us crumble beneath the shadow of your outstretched arm."*
- Because whenever those walls come down, the Gospel becomes more believable—and the face of Christ becomes easier to see.