

OUTSIDERS ARE INSIDERS; ALL ARE WELCOME

Mt 15.21-28 (3Trito)Is 56.1,6-7 Rom 11.13-32

Another week goes by, and at least springtime and equinox is getting closer. This week we sadly said farewell to our longest term parishioner of 83 years, at the age of 99, only 5 months short of her centenary, Eunice Wilson, who married Francis, her husband of 63 years here in 1943. I quote my predecessor, Bill Attard's words, when I informed him of the news: "*How sad, John. I knew and loved her; she came to our healing Masses and always with a smile.*" She leaves 5 daughters and their husbands, 14 grandchildren and 18 great grandchildren, so what a legacy, and a committed parishioner to the end. When I visited her recently, she said how she was so looking forward to her 100th birthday, but the best laid plans and hopes are not always to be! Most of her expressed wishes were fulfilled, as Nanny, particularly to see her 5 daughters and grandchildren grow up healthy and happy, and hoped to be a great grandmother one day! Well, she certainly saw that, but sadly, not the centenary, when the family hope to celebrate and place her ashes in St Therese's Memorial Garden – as her son-on-law Steve paid tribute to his '*Favourite mother-in-law*'!! May the lovely Eunice, with her enduring and endearing smile, rest in peace, as we acknowledge with gratitude the terrific contribution she has made to parish life here at St Therese's, for over 8 decades!

Controversy has blown up at the end of this week, as an Australian cartoonist was heavily criticized for portraying 55 year old Kamala Harris, recently nominated US Democrat presidential running mate, with 77 year old Joe Biden, handing over to '*a little brown girl*', so he can '*go for a lie-down*'. There can be a fine line between satire and personal denigration, and to me, this wasn't just about racism, but perhaps ageism as well! It is said that all lives matter, not just '*Black Lives Matter*', but the point is that the injustice and oppression of minority groups, because of prejudice or indifference does need to be highlighted and addressed.

And one thing that the coronavirus pandemic has exposed is something we already had a sense of, the problems of aged care in our society in general. Once again, the cartoonist Michael Leunig puts it poignantly this weekend, in his depiction of "*Sunny Meadows Retirement Village*", with accompanying *Anthem*: "*Australians all let us rejoice, for we are young and free. But when you're old, We lock you up, And throw away the key. Our land abounds with nature's gifts, Of beauty rich and rare. But old age is too scary for the young and free to care.*"

Fortunately, I have to say that my long-term experience of aged care leads me to reflect favourably on the facilities within our own parish environment here in Essendon, but we also know that a mentality of '*out of sight and out of mind*', compounded by focus on profit, which has been exposed as real problems, is in completely the wrong direction, and things can always be done much better, as we learn from our mistakes and ignorance, and address the wrongs. It comes back to acknowledging the respect and dignity due to every person, irrespective of age, race, colour or status, as today's Gospel emphasizes in the end.

This weekend, we have our annual "*Opening of the Doors Foundation Appeal*" to support indigenous education, as a practical means of redressing in some way the severe educational disadvantage of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, so here's an opportunity to make a contribution (*details in parish bulletin on website stthereses.org.au*).

And now for a rather difficult Gospel story, as Matthew, after a further attack by Jesus, on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and Sadducees, extends Jesus' ministry into foreign territory, where, at first, he doesn't seem all that sensitive to the Canaanite woman with the sick daughter. The seemingly harsh encounter could be softened by remembering that Jesus is keen to discern and elicit faith, sincerity, persistence and determination, so that once this woman responds to him a second time, accepting his words, but still seeking healing for her daughter, Jesus immediately changes his tune. Furthermore, this woman represents two aspects of being an outsider, not just as a Gentile, but also as an apparently unsupported woman with an afflicted daughter (a double or even triple whammy!).

Matthew is still conscious of writing for an audience primarily of Jewish background and tradition, so that is his first concern, but then moves to the broader scene of others being welcome and included as part of the early Christian communities as well. Jesus has already reached out to heal the centurion's servant, but here there is not just hesitancy, but initial silence and then refusal on Jesus' part. (In the past, I'd never been so aware of his negativity in this encounter!) And then the offensive imagery of the children getting the food rather than the housedogs doesn't deter her, as she responds to counter Jesus and he finally affirms her.

At first, it is a jarring scene, with Jesus' seeming rejection of the Gentile woman's natural request for healing of her afflicted daughter. Then it gets worse, as he uses the rather offensive image of the house-dogs (Gentiles or foreigners) not getting what the children (of Israel) deserve. As scripture scholar Donald Senior describes it, her tenacity is extraordinary and clever, as she addresses Jesus with deference as 'Lord' and then with a clever retort about even the house-dogs getting the scraps. Senior points out the contrast between last week's image of Peter's *weak, fearful and hesitant faith*, as he sinks into the waters of darkness and chaos, while the Canaanite woman's faith is *strong, unhesitant and persistent*, as she confronts Jesus a third time, convinced that he can help her daughter, and his resistance dissolves.

In the end, Matthew is addressing the issue of Jesus universalizing his mission, so as to make the early Christian communities, strongly conditioned to Jewish ritual, law, practices and traditions, more open and accepting of diversity and multiculturalism, if you like, to use a modern term. Jesus' mission is not exclusive, but inclusive. As Senior concludes: *"By also showing Jesus yielding to the genuine faith of the Canaanite woman, the evangelist counselled his Jewish-Christian community that a mission to the Gentiles was part of God's plan and not incompatible with reverence for Israel's historic privilege."*

Worth noting too, is Brendan Byrne SJ's reference: *"Recent feminist interpretation has rightly identified this Canaanite woman as one of the great heroes of the Gospel tradition. Jesus allows her to 'educate' him out of the narrow understanding of his mission that his early responses betray. He is not only Messiah for the Jews, but also the One in whose 'name the Gentiles will place their hope'. The great mission charge to the nations at the end of the Gospel has its anticipation and impulse here."*

And just to conclude in reverse, Triton-Isaiah today speaks of universal recognition of all as God's people, and advocates that full rights, protection and privileges be granted to all. There is no room for superiority complexes or division between diverse peoples. Brendan points out that Jesus moves from crossing the ritual cleanliness barrier in his teaching, *(This doesn't mean we don't need to wash our hands carefully, wear our masks, observe physical distancing, and generally maintain our standards of hygiene, particularly at the present time!)* From condemning the hypocrisy of the religious leaders critical of him, he now crosses the geographical boundaries: *"The narrative first intensifies the sense of the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, only to highlight the significance of what is happening when, as a result of the woman's faith, the barrier comes crashing down!"*

And so it's a reminder to you and me that, in a world currently where divisions and suspicions of each other are being highlighted and increased, we need to work for inclusion and acceptance of all, so as to break down the barriers which divide us, and work together on that which unites us, for the good of all.

And we continue to hope for an end to lockdown once this pandemic is under some sort of control. Let's live the good news of the call to inclusion and diversity as well as we can, in the circumstances we find ourselves.