**SUNDAY, 16TH AUGUST 2020**

**Isa.45:1, 6-8; Rom. 11: 1-2a, 29-32; Matt. 15:10-28**

In the midst of this pandemic, some sport events have managed to take place, albeit, without spectators. One such very important sport event (for me) was the England v West Indies 3-test series cricket in July. England, having lost the first test, won the second and third at the Emirates Old Trafford; the final one on 24 July by 269 runs and with almost a day and a half to spare and the series 2-1 to retain the Wisden Trophy forever. But Jason Holder, the West Indies captain and his players saluted Joe Root the England Captain and congratulated the team on a good series. Without a crowd to cheer England, the Windies applauds them. Their response is an act of great graciousness. In sport, where the victors often caper triumphantly and losers cast blame, this display from the Windies is especially touching. It is **empathy** – the ability to walk in another’s shoes – that is what prompts this act of **grace**.

In today’s Gospel reading Jesus has been embroiled in controversy with the Pharisees and scribes. The particular issue is ritual hand washing, but for Jesus the wider issue is the place of tradition in the life of faith.

Despairing of the Jewish leaders, Jesus tells the crowd that we are defiled by what we say, not by eating with unwashed hands. This upsets the Pharisees and disturbs the disciples who reproach Jesus. The disciples do not understand, so Jesus spells it out.

We are not defiled by what we eat, by what passes through our stomachs and away. We are defiled by the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts, as shown in our words and actions. As long as we put external traditions before the reality of who and what we are, we are doomed.

To escape further confrontations, Jesus withdraws to Gentile territory, to Tyre and Sidon. There he encounters a Gentile woman and we encounter a very different Jesus – stern, judgemental and, seemingly, uncaring. It is a troubling encounter!

The woman implores Jesus to free her daughter from an evil spirit. She calls him “Lord” and “Son of David”, affirmations of faith in Jesus used by the early Church. Jesus ignores her. She persists. The disciples tell Jesus to send her away, to which Jesus answers that he was sent to the leaderless sheep of Israel. The woman will not give up and, kneeling, begs Jesus once more. His response is that it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs. She understands what he says:

* The children are the people of Israel.
* The dogs are pagans such as herself. The term used for dogs is not as hostile as it sounds; it refers to pets, house dogs, animals permitted near the family table, but still there is a vast difference between these dogs and children who have places at the table.
* The food is the message of Jesus, everything he says and does.

Undaunted, the woman replies that even as the children eat, the dogs under the table pick up their dropped scraps and crumbs – both children and dogs are fed.

In the woman’s persistence Jesus recognises both faith and love for her daughter – the words she has spoken reveal the workings of her heart. Perhaps, too, Jesus can understand her persistence, for he has struggled to bring God’s word to people who will not listen and knows what it is to be ignored. **Empathy** prompts **grace** – “Let it be done for you.”

Today’s Gospel is full of challenges:

1. The story of the Canaanite woman and Jesus can help believers today grapple with the questions of inclusion and embracing of diversity. This Gospel invites believers today to embrace a Jesus who had the ability to change his perception of the outsider “a dog”, to see her as a child of the promise to whom His salvation fully extended.
2. It is impossible to have a religious faith that is free from tradition – but tradition must serve faith; faith must not be the slave to tradition. Christians are members of a community called to faith, holiness and service; in every generation we are called to discover what strengthens the life of this community and what weakens its witness and service. Jesus is clear – God desires mercy, not sacrifice. The attitudes and commitments of our hearts are shown in the way we speak and act, and they betray who we really are.
3. Jesus is not the hazy, pastel-coloured figure of the Victorian Sunday School room. He is far from meek and mild! Is our understanding and experience of the person of Jesus “grown up” enough to cope with the changes and chances of today’s world? The Gospel challenges a too-comfortable picture of Jesus – he is robust, he can be brusque, he certainly has “attitude”. This should not surprise us, as an inoffensive milksop would not have been crucified! It is this Jesus who can help Christians today be converted from racism, sexism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and myriad other obstacles to perceiving the “other” as sister or brother. If we are to follow Jesus we need to be realistic about Him in whose steps we will tread.

The figure of the Canaanite woman is also one that can help steel a believer to speak out strongly and persistently on behalf of the world’s needy children. This Canaanite woman was vulnerable because of her need. The disciples thought of her as if she were a nuisance. And they wanted to be rid of her. Yet, the woman was persistent because she was interceding on behalf of her daughter who was demon possessed. Jesus was obviously the only One that could help her daughter. Despite being ignored, insulted, and disregarded, the Canaanite woman does not desist until she has secured healing for her daughter. The way that she greets Jesus calling Him "Son of David" tells us that she already knows about His ability to heal. This mother’s love for her daughter was far greater than any social boundaries. She is an icon of God’s persistent care for the most needy, as she gives voice to the needs of one who is helplessly caught in demonic power. She impels believers to commit themselves to action on behalf of the most vulnerable of our world.

Be assured, that this Canaanite woman has not beaten Jesus in an argument, nor shamed him into healing her daughter. The healing is an act of grace, freely given. All we have, all we are, are gifts of God’s **grace** – gifts of God who, in Christ Jesus, has shared our human lives and has walked in our shoes. To realise this sets us free to cultivate empathy – the imaginative walking in the shoes of others – that allows us to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful. **Empathy** prompts **grace**.

Lord of heaven and earth,

as Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer,

give us patience and courage never to lose hope,

but always to bring our prayers before you; through

Jesus Christ our Lord.