

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

20th August 2016

Who's in who's out? It's a game we all like to play. Our society is divided into innumerable groups. Some groups are hostile to each other; some groups are hostile to society in general. Within social groups there are those individuals who command the centre stage while others are on the fringe never quite accepted into the centre. Social commentators often say that we live in an 'age of fundamentalism'. Fundamentalist groups are characterised by the strict adherence to a set of basic ideas or principles. Our society and media are characterised by gross generalisations where groups are quickly stereotyped i.e. all priest are paedophiles, all Muslims are terrorists, all people out of work are dole bludgers. It may interest you to know that a recent article in an online newspaper rated Blacktown as Australia's second worst area for 'dole bludgers'. The article backs up this claim saying that 330 residents failed to attend five or more Centrelink appointments. Now the estimated population of Blacktown City is 340,000 people, so based on the actions of 1 person in 1,000 we are socially stereotyped. You don't need a degree in statistics to

realise that based on this type of evidence any community could be accused of anything.

Once we have stereotyped someone we are fond of passing judgement. My grandfather George, who was fond of stories, used to tell a story about a Rabbi who died: A Rabbi died and went to heaven. Being a learned man who read widely, he was puzzled by two things one was a high wall and the other was the lack of Catholics. Unable to contain himself any longer the Rabbi asked: What's the wall for? That's for the Catholics came a reply, they like to believe they are the only ones in Heaven.

Today's readings call us to unity not division, they call us to live out God's desire to unify all creation. In the first reading the prophet Isaiah instructs the Jews that any foreigners that serve and honour the Lord will be accepted by the Lord. Isaiah's teaching was pretty radical in that it embraced foreigners when the Jews were living under the rule of a foreign power, Assyria. Also at that time the prophet Isaiah the Jewish nation believed that they were God's chosen people. The Jews like the Catholics in my grandfather's story thought they had exclusive access to God. Isaiah's

message to the Jews was quite countercultural; if anyone Jew or foreigner embraces God, God will embrace them. Further on in the passage Isaiah takes his message of inclusivity further saying that even eunuchs are welcomed to join God's people. Eunuchs are those who had been sexually mutilated for service in a foreign court or harem were considered repugnant by the Jews. Furthermore both foreigners and eunuchs were condemned under Jewish Law in Deuteronomy. However, Isaiah taught that they were all welcome in the Kingdom of God. God was challenging His people to be motivated by love not laws.

Paul's letter to the Romans is both a call to pagans and to his own Jewish people. Paul makes it quite clear that his mission to the pagans is in the hope that some of his fellow Jews will be so embarrassed by the conversion of the pagans that they too will embrace the Christian message. Paul's message like Isaiah before him is one of inclusivity, but not just before the Law, Paul calls for inclusivity in the mystical Body of Christ. Who does Paul call? Paul calls the pagans and the Jews the very persecutors of the Christian communities. Paul yearns for the union of all peoples under Christ echoing that beautiful paragraph earlier in

his letter to the Romans: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

Mathew’s description of the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is set in the region of Tyre and Sidon. This opening sentence is loaded with meaning. Tyre and Sidon were in the Roman province of Phoenicia north of Galilee and some 200kms north of Jerusalem so the encounter took place outside the Jewish lands. Fr Geoffrey Plant points out that Jews held the inhabitants of these lands in contempt referring to them as ‘goyim’, outsiders, or more pejoratively as dogs. Hence the references to dogs in today’s Gospel. As far as the Jews were concerned Jesus was in the bad lands of the gentiles. In this land of ‘dogs’ Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman. Now in Deuteronomy the Canaanites were one of the nations that God commands the Israelites to utterly destroy. So being a Canaanite woman in the land of ‘dogs’ this woman would have been the lowest of the low. What I find interesting is that this Canaanite woman calls Jesus “Son of David”. In New Testament times “Son of David” refers to a healer, as King Solomon, King David’s son was a healer. So the woman recognises Jesus as a

healer. What's even more interesting is Jesus rejects the woman even though it's Jesus who has entered these gentile lands; Jesus has made the opening move so as to speak. But, still Jesus rejects her pleas saying He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. In His rebuttal Jesus reflects the contempt the Canaanites were held by Israel referring to them as dogs. The woman is not put off by this rebuttal claiming that even dogs get fed. Finally, Jesus sees the woman's great faith and grants her request. For me Jesus' rebuttal of the woman beautifully illustrates Jesus humanity. Clearly this mission has taken him outside of his comfort zone. Quite often we think of Jesus as having a 'God card' in His pocket and when things got tough He whipped out His God card and all was good. Not so not so. Jesus like Paul knew His mission was to Israel but Jesus mission had taken Him to the edge. The edge of His country, the edge of Society, and the edge of His comfort zone, in that place of great vulnerability He is forced to decide between; the Law, the social norms of His day and Love. When confronted with the absolute faith of the Canaanite woman Jesus chose love, Jesus chose to include rather than exclude.

This week we saw the tragic results of exclusion in Barcelona where a van was used to murder innocent women, men and children, in the name of a perverse fundamentalist group. I purposely did not use the word Islamic because these people are not like Muslims that I know, they are murderers who seek to divide our society through fear and hate. We also saw this week Senator Hanson wearing a burqa into Parliament as part of her campaign for it to be banned. Senator Hanson's action was the action of a person who seeks to exclude rather than include, who seeks to divide rather than unite. Senator Hanson was rebuked by the attorney general, George Brandis. Senator Brandis rightly describe it as an appalling action designed to ridicule that community, to drive it into a corner, to mock its religious garments. Senator Brandis call to unity took great courage and any who saw Senator Brandis speak would agree his words clearly came from his heart, words that may well define his time in public office.

As the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman shows inclusion takes great courage, love takes great courage. St Benedict constantly reminds his monks that they will be called to account for all their

actions. The question I ask myself is will I be one of the ones who's in or who's out?