

The Wideness of God's Mercy

It seems to me that Jesus learnt something from his encounter with the Gentile Canaanite woman. Jesus knew his mission was to his fellow Jews: *the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. But the woman's response revealed to him, as well as to the readers of the gospels, that although that was the priority of his mission, it wasn't the limit of it. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the first generation of Christians (with varying degrees of reluctance or enthusiasm) enabled Gentiles to share in the saving love of God expressed in Jesus Christ; we readily forget that we are among the inheritors of that grace.

It put me in mind of the hymn I know as *There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea*. So I looked it up; and discovered that there were originally a couple of verses prior to my opening verse, so others know it as *Souls of men, why will ye scatter like a crowd of frightened sheep?* – and that's how it appears in the *Anglican Hymn Book* (#480).

I learnt that the hymn was written by a 19th century priest, Frederick William Faber. Raised and ordained in the Church of England, he followed John Henry Newman into the Roman Catholic Church; and it was for that Church that he wrote of the order of 150 hymns, among them the equally expansive, *My God, how wonderful thou art*. He wanted Roman Catholics to be able to experience the simplicity and fervour familiar to him from his Protestant past: hymns by the likes of Charles Wesley, John Newton and William Cowper.

Succeeding phrases in the hymn include, *There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed ... But we make his love too narrow by false limits of our own ... For the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind*. I'm wondering if these assertions in any way reflected a personal journey that Faber had made from a strict Calvinistic upbringing into the Roman Catholic Church? When I as an ordinand I encountered the Catholic tradition in the Church of England at my training college, I sensed its generosity and openness. The task of the Church, it implied, is to proclaim the glory and grace of God, and not to enter into judgement on the state of the souls of individual believers, or what is required to qualify (as it were) for salvation. That's not to imply, of course, that Catholicism isn't capable of being exclusive; or Evangelicals of being accepting and grace-full.

I'm always interested, in this year of Matthew's Gospel, to see how his account differs from Mark's, where that is his source. In Mark, Jesus is indoors and the woman engages him directly. In Matthew, Jesus is on the move with his disciples, who come between him and the woman and urge him to send her away. It's a phrase they've used before, prior to Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, when they tell him to send the people away so they can go and buy food. Their self-appointed bodyguard role is repeated when people bring children to Jesus to be blessed; and they express their disapproval of the woman who wastes a jar of ointment on Jesus' head. We get the picture: on each occasion the disciples are in the wrong, preventing people from accessing the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are not to do as they did; in Faber's words, making *[God's] love too narrow* by imposing *false limits of our own*.

As an incumbent in an institutional Church, charged with maintaining its boundaries and personally inclined to follow rules rather than deviate from them, it sometimes gives me pause for thought: am I obediently implementing *false limits*; or taking an appropriate stance to maintain important truths, in the face of a culture which no longer recognises authority but promotes personal entitlement, to have what one wants? Surrounding the sacraments, for example: insisting that godparents need to be already baptised; or not inviting all to receive Holy Communion (rather than those who have been Confirmed in the Church of England or baptised and admitted to Communion in this or another Church).

I'm also inclined to ask each week whether Matthew could have been angling the passage for the benefit of his Jewish Christian readership. In their circumstances, they may have identified more with the Gentile woman than with the Jewish disciples, for their experience may well have been that of being *sent away*: excluded from synagogue and Jewish community because of their allegiance to Christ. Tragic though that experience must have been, they are assured that, through Christ, they cannot be excluded from God's mercy.

We, reading the story today, may find it harder to identify with the Canaanite woman, for we are insiders, rather than outsiders. But that challenge is worth taking up, whenever there is a case of exclusion. In a meeting the other day we were asked to imagine what it's like trying to visit one of our churches in a wheelchair, without an escort. How easy is it even to open the door, for example? Or I think of a valid asylum-seeker, having fled oppression in a dangerous country, only to find themselves patently unwelcome, even at risk, here in the UK.

The experience of Jewish Christians of being excluded from their own community brings them closer to those they might previously have kept at a distance: Gentile Christians – who, like the Canaanite woman, have faith in Jesus. At this point I might mention today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. In this case we have a mainly Gentile readership. Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, is asking whether God has rejected, sent away, his people Israel – because of their *disobedience*, their rejection of Christ. Paul cannot believe that this is the case: he is convinced that God's intention is *to be merciful to all*. *There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea ...*

Admittedly I was brought up in the Church of England. But one of the attractions for me of becoming an incumbent in this Church is its strong sense of existing not just for the benefit of its members, but for the whole communities within which we are set. The love of God is not restricted to those who have found their way into this expression of faith or this particular building. And each member of the Church of England needs not only to recognise that, but to seek to express it – in how we are as a church and how we relate to our neighbours and neighbourhoods. That's demonstrated, for example, in the welcome you extend to those who wish to come here to be married (although of course they have found their way into this building).

Fr Frederick Faber expressed the *wideness of God's mercy* by writing his hymn – and, I imagine, in his ministry. How do we express it?