

The earliest churches had a great struggle to accommodate the range of different people coming to faith in Jesus Christ. The Christian movement was, after all, an entirely Jewish movement at first, and then it quickly became a cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse reality. But it was not without much confusion and resistance at the start.

Our gospel reading today dives head-long into this confusion – and the mixed feelings – that surrounded what it meant to follow Jesus and especially about who was included in God's plan of salvation.

We live in a time when universalism is in vogue – at least here in the west. A time of what we might describe as 'easy' universalism. Diversity and universalism are especially important to many of us in the prelude of progressive Christianity. We expect diversity, tolerance and respect – when we are at our best. We are quite likely to be suspicious of claims about 'the divine election of peoples or persons' or worse we might regard it with revulsion.

This lens through which we view this gospel passage might lead us to write it off as one of Jesus' lesser moments that we need not spend any time on. I suggest the opposite is true, a deeper understanding of the God of Israel is necessary for us to be witnesses of Jesus in our time. If one wishes to be true to the biblical witness we must examine what the scriptures say about the chosenness of Israel and how Christians share in it through Jesus.ⁱ

As I was digging deeper into this text this week – to make sense of Jesus' harsh words and his position on the scope of his earthly mission when he says, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" – I came across a reference to a passage from the prophet Zechariah that intrigued me, a less familiar text than the wonderful passages from the prophet Isaiah describing the vocation of Israel to be "a light to all nations." Here is what I read from Jesuit scholar Daniel Harrington:

"The apparent contradiction between universalism and exclusivism can be clarified, if not resolved, by calling to mind the Jewish nature of universalism. Gentiles approach the God of Israel through Israel. This process is displayed beautifully in Zechariah 8:20-23, which develops a picture drawn previously in Isaiah 2:2-4. The peoples of the earth come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem. Then in a magnificent word-picture the prophet says: "In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of the Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" This kind of dynamic is played out in Matthew's version of the conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman."

This is how I imagine the heart of the Canaanite woman – that she was saying in her heart, "Jesus, we have heard that God is with you." She trusts that Jesus the Jew, who she addresses as Lord and Son of David, can heal her child. The Canaanite woman is known as a model of "praying faith." She had dogged determination – pun intended – and the hearers of this story in Matthew's community would have focused on her identity as a Gentile. The Canaanite people were regarded as wild dogs; the people of Israel as the children in this story. It served as a kind of explanation for why Jews and Gentiles could exist together in the same Christian community. Faith in Jesus' power – like the Canaanite woman – this becomes the criteria by which the Gentiles are part of the Christian community. "The God of Jesus is the God of Israel." There is much for us to explore on the theme of universalism and the doctrine of the chosenness of Israel.

That said, what do you think about this? – having faith in the power of Jesus – this is what makes us part of the Christian community. Really? It's not the inclusivity and tolerance we proclaim? Our progressive attitudes and viewpoints? Our claim to be accepting people? Hmmm. We have lots of criteria – spoken and unspoken, formal, canonical, casual – but – what if we decided the power of Jesus Christ is where it's at? That trusting in the power of Jesus is how we become community.

The Canaanite woman perseveres in her conviction that Jesus can do for her what she desperately needs. She is single-minded in her pursuit of Jesus' healing. She wrenches from Jesus the blessing that she, a non-Jewish mother, needs. She seeks Jesus in her time of greatest need.

What would it look like in your life, if you trusted that Jesus can do for you what you desperately need? PAUSE.
How does it feel to imagine that God can do for St. John's what we desperately need, as a community? PAUSE.

It is interesting to ponder the idea of trusting God – for we all have our own ideas about what we need, what St. John's needs, what our government needs, our country needs...

The Canaanite woman's need was met. Her daughter was healed. It was a happy ending for her, and a new day for the growing Christian community, the early church. What about for us? Do we believe God will meet our every need? That the Lord will provide for us? That God cares enough to listen to our petitions? These are big questions of faith!

The Canaanite woman takes the risk of remaining a petitioner. Even after insult she persists. Can we persist? Is that a risk we are willing to take? Could we come together and say to one another 'let us go together for God is with us' 'let us go together, trusting in Jesus' power'

We have our own struggles as a church today – with our attitudes about who is 'in' and who is 'out' and our fixations with 'who is on which side of what issue.' We may believe in the principles of inclusivity and diversity until personalities get in the way. We live in a time of confusion and we make our fair share of confusion too.

Even still we pray "Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid...." God knows us through and through, and comes to us again in love, again today, inviting us to hear God's Word, to share the Holy Meal, and to open our hearts in prayer.

God invites us to take the same risks in our time – to trust that Jesus can do for us what we so desperately need. May it be so for you and for me.

ⁱ *The Gospel of Matthew*, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., Sacra Pagina Series, Volume 1, The Liturgical Press, 1991, pages 236-238.