

FIRST READING

The Epistle is written in the 11th chapter of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans beginning at the 1st verse.

¹I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ²⁹For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Romans 11.1-2a, 29-32

GOSPEL

¹⁰Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.'

¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?'

¹³He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.' ¹⁵But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.'

¹⁶Then he said, 'Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.'

²¹Jesus went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²A Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' ²³But he did not answer her at all.

And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'

²⁴He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'

²⁶He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' ²⁷She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish'.

And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15.10 - 28

SERMON BY CATHY MATTHEWS

Stick your hand up if you find it difficult to pray. Don't worry. No one can see you. There must be some advantages to having services on-line!

I find praying difficult. But God likes us to talk to him and we should try to do it.

There are different ways to pray; silent, contemplative prayer which is mainly about listening to God, liturgical prayer where we all pray in unison, charismatic prayer where we are more spontaneous, the Lord's Prayer, which is Jesus's template, and others.

The word ACTS springs to mind; A C T S, the acronym on which our prayer might be based. Adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication.

It just so happens that our gospel reading from Matthew gives us useful guidance about how to pray, so let's look at it in more detail. The way in which the Canaanite woman talks to Jesus, and what is talking to Jesus if not prayer, is a wonderful example of a type of supplication – intercessory prayer,

prayer on behalf of others. That is what we do during our normal Sunday morning services. The intercessions. People tackle them differently. We can all learn something from the Canaanite woman.

Jesus has withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is the only time we know of, that Jesus leaves Jewish territory. Perhaps he wants a bit of peace. The people in this area were hostile towards the Jews. Despite that, the woman does not hesitate to come to Jesus. Perhaps she has heard people talking about him.

She prays for her demon-possessed daughter. Her prayer is answered. Her daughter is healed immediately.

Why is her prayer so effective?

1: She begins by worshipping Jesus. She calls him Lord. This is what God wants from us. If we go back to the idea of ACTS, the first thing God wants from us is our adoration. This is not because he is arrogant. God is perfect. It is because he loves us from the bottom of his heart and wants us to return that love. He wants to know that we adore him. The definition of adoration is to regard someone with deep respect and affection. I cannot think of better qualities on which to base any relationship.

2: She understands who Jesus is. She calls him “Son of David”. In the Book of Samuel, God tells King David that the Messiah will be a descendant of his.

It is good when we pray to remember some of the names of Jesus, for example, the seven “I am’s” in the Gospel of John. We might refer to him as “Good Shepherd”, or “Light of the World”, for example. It just reminds us of what he is to us.

Many did not and still do not understand who Jesus is. Unfortunately it is also possible to think we know him and still not to do so. As it says in the Gospel of Matthew, on Judgment Day Jesus might say to us, that he never knew us. *Matthew 7 v 23*

Let’s try to make sure we know him and he knows us. Praying is a good place to start.

3: She is persistent and confident. She is not put off by the irritation of the disciples, or by the fact that initially Jesus does not answer her. Perhaps he is testing her faith. He doesn’t always answer us straight away either. She even manages to respond with wit about the dogs eating the crumbs thrown from the table. Jesus says that we should ask confidently for what we need – “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.” *Matthew 7 v 7,8*

4: She is very good at interceding. Even though she is praying for her daughter, she asks Jesus to have mercy on her. She makes her daughter’s needs her own. Hence she prays with passion. We tend to be less passionate about the needs of someone else than about our own. But it is her daughter and she loves her. It is easier to pray passionately about someone whom one loves.

Asking someone to have mercy on you implies that you in some way do not deserve his kindness and attention. Clearly the woman is aware that she is a sinner. So she asks for forgiveness. There we have ACTS again. Adoration, Confession.

Are we aware of how little we actually deserve the mercy of Jesus?

5: The most significant thing about her prayer is of course that she has great faith. Jesus tells her this. He only says it to one other person who also happens to be a Gentile – the centurion whose servant Jesus also heals at a distance.

Faith is a bit confusing. We are told we only need faith the size of a mustard seed to move mountains. My faith is about that size. I definitely have some, but it is not massive. Perhaps about the size of a Brazil nut. I have never caused a mountain to move. I think it is easy for faith to be blocked by sin, or sadness, or some other negative thing. I have, however, come across people whose prayers are pretty effective. Prayer warriors. And you sort of know, when they pray for you that something is going to happen.

So adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication. We are not told that she thanked Jesus but I am sure that in her heart, at least, she did.

Let us now pray for this world.

Dear Lord Jesus,

You are the Good Shepherd and we are your sheep. We truly long to know you better and to follow you faithfully. Please forgive us as we continually fail to do this. We will keep trying.

Thank you for the overwhelming beauty of creation. May we never take it for granted. May it teach us about your goodness and may it be a source of comfort to all.

Things here on earth are rather difficult just now. We are therefore handing the situation over to you. Please would you bring good out of the fear and pain that exist in many parts of the world. Even though we do not deserve your help, we know that you will help us.

Amen