

## Reflection, August 19-20, 2023, 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

John Rietschlin

As I reflected and prayed with this Sunday's readings, I was struck by a common thread shared by all three scripture texts. The authors in each of these passages challenge their readers to reflect on their personal assumptions around who might find favour with God. To put it in more modern language, Isaiah, Matthew, and Paul are saying, "Get out of your self-righteous comfort zone!". Let's look a bit more closely.

The author in the passage from Isaiah is addressing the Hebrew people who had returned from exile in Babylon. At this point in their history, the Temple had been rebuilt and the custom of worshiping God through prayer and sacrifice in the Temple, re-established. But is it just those who go to the Temple who find favour with God? No! says Isaiah. In fact, God looks for "worship" in the form of "justice and doing what is right." Anyone who honours God by attempting to live according to God's desire that all should be treated justly and rightly will be brought by God to God's holy mountain. Offering sacrifice in the Temple, may provide a unique venue to become aware of God's sacred presence, but it does not confer any special privileged access.

In today's Gospel passage, Matthew provides important insight into Jesus' own growth in awareness of the breadth of God's love for all people. Jesus had ventured into Canaanite territory—a place where Jews were not particularly welcome. While he is there, he has an incredible encounter. He meets a woman who would generally be considered as very low status and an enemy of the Jews, God's chosen people. In this encounter, he moves quickly from ignoring her, to relating to her in a very stand-offish almost hostile way, to finally recognizing her deep faith—a faith that few of the members of his own Jewish nation had developed. Jesus sees clearly that this woman is trying to live in unity with God, his Father, and he grants her wish for a miraculous healing of her daughter. Writing for an audience of Jewish followers of Jesus, Matthew wants to help them understand that God's people can be found anywhere and among any group.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he describes himself as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul has focused his mission on Gentile peoples across the Roman empire and in Rome itself, because most Jewish people in Palestine have rejected it. As he says, the disobedience of the Jewish people has created an opportunity for the Gentiles to leave behind their own disobedience and accept the blessings of God's mercy brought through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But Paul is clear that his Gentile readers should not consider themselves

superior—he lives in hope that their example might lead the Jewish people to a change of heart, also accepting Jesus.

So, what do these scripture passages say to me today? What do they say to each of us? One message that comes through to me is that God's love, God's care, God's presence is so much bigger, so much deeper than I, than we, can possibly imagine. And that a core challenge in my life, in our lives, is to allow God to help us grow in that awareness. Such growth might transform our world in ways that we can scarcely imagine.

However, much of the messaging that comes at us today from so many sources, seems to say the opposite. We are encouraged to be afraid. To close ourselves in. To protect ourselves and our families against those who don't share our belief system, our skin colour, or our culture. Or to give power to those who promise to protect us from whatever threat seems most prominent. Much of today's political landscape around the world seems driven by this sort of fear.

**→ *Display slide on overhead screen***

Can we dare to reject—both privately and publicly—these messages of fear? Can we dare to believe that God is deeply present and acting in people of good will like our friends shown here at the Ottawa airport—throughout our city, our country, our world? Do we dare to believe that we—each of us—are called to join them? No matter how small we may be, no matter how weak, united with one another through God's grace, we can help to build God's kingdom transforming our life together here on this earth—seen here as a beautiful blue globe rising over the moon's horizon. A kingdom where all people—whether they are members of our religious group, of our ethnicity, of our nation, or not—can work to care for one another—united in God's care and in God's love.

It seems to me that this is the change of heart to which Isaiah called the Hebrews and that Paul urged on the Romans. That people of good will, people who hunger for justice, people touched by God's grace, can be found anywhere. It is this change of heart that Jesus experienced as he grew in unity with his Father. It is this growth that allowed him to recognize the faith of the Canaanite woman in today's gospel. It is this grace that gave him the courage to stand firm in the face of persecution and, finally death, at the hands of religious and civil leaders who governed through fear.

Am I ready to allow God to change my heart in this way? Are each of us? Let us pray for that grace. Amen.

John Rietschlin  
August 19-20, 2023

