

Gathering Others*Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28*

No matter where you went to school, there were few more soul-destroying moments on the playing fields or in the gym than when you were lined up and the school sports captains were choosing sides for their teams. You may have been able to recite yards of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's, 'The Lady of Shalott', or all of Robert Burns', 'Tam O'Shanter'; you may have been able to do the 12 times table without faltering, or rattle through the line of succession for the Scottish Kings and Queens; you may have been able to spell rhododendron and chrysanthemum and Mississippi by the age of seven. But 'waiting to be picked' for a team, to see who was included first, and who was grudgingly admitted by the end of the process as an act of charity though a recognised liability was often brutal. So also being included in a certain 'set' - school, university, work or neighbourhood. Would you be deemed worthy enough, interesting enough, stylish enough, funny enough, clever enough to 'fit in'. Not everyone cared, some were brave enough, clever enough, strong enough to do their own thing as idiosyncratic individuals, but the criteria for inclusion then, and maybe still now, can leave lasting scars and a sense of unworthiness.

What was learned at school carries on into adult life. That sifting Edinburgh question, 'Where did you go to school', still divides. Which university? Which professional firm do you work for? Where do you do your shopping? What Church do you attend? Where is your golf club membership? Followed by the accepting smile, or the ever-so-slightly raised eyebrow. Some years ago I remember deeply impressing an elderly lady when we were talking about funerals and wondering where we'd go as both of us were without family. "I've got a lair in the Grange", I told her. "Oh.

Please don't judge me, I'm going to Craigmillar Castle cemetery. I do hope you'll still take the service." And indeed, I did!

The winnowing, the assessing, the placing into pigeon holes has its darker side. Judgements about gender, or age, or lifestyle choice, or marital status, or ethnicity continue to cast a sinister shadow over humanity in every walk of life. When did humanity become so adept at making up its mind about those who were, 'not quite our sort of people'? It's Biblical. In the Book of Judges the people of Gilead defeated the Ephraimites in battle, and some tried to escape back over the Jordan to their own land. The people of Gilead secured the crossings, and if they suspected someone was an escaping Ephraimite, they made them say the word, '*shibboleth*', which they couldn't as they said, '*sibboleth*', so their different pronunciation, or speech impediment, betrayed them and they were put to the sword.

The children of Israel in the Book of Isaiah were a hot mess. Exiles in Babylon had been far from home and some had drifted from their ancient faith, and most struggled to hold on to belief in an incredibly hard time. As they returned to the homeland they found others living in their homes, a disaster economy, a mix of cultures and religions and a lack of order they had known in exile. The Temple had been destroyed. There were the Jews left behind who had not been considered important or wealthy enough to have been exiled. After scavenging for a living for decades watching other people come and rule their land, they were not confronted by the returning, uppity exiles. There were also other powerless non-Jews and foreigners who had landed in this politically unstable country and were now unsure of their own future as the Jews figured out how to reorganize both as a religion and as a society.ⁱ

When it comes to faith: who is in, who is out? When it comes to community: who is in, who is out? Who will fit in, and who will not? Who will belong, and who will not. When God purposes to deliver people from captivity and oppression, from neglect and abuse, who will be saved?

The requirements are spelled out. Be fair and just in your treatment of others; do the right thing; keep the Sabbath day for worship, do your best to keep your promises to God, and refrain from doing anything evil. And then, says God, I will gather them in, not only those on the 'inside', but those who are outcasts. *"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples...I will gather yet others..."* It's what Jesus says when He cleanses the Temple in what we call Holy Week. If you do your best to keep the faith, and live a decent life, whoever you are, whatever your background, wherever you have come from, God will gather You in, to be His family. Right there in the Old Testament, before you get to that trendy liberal Jesus and His unsettling fancy ways about mercy and forgiveness. Right there in the Old Testament where people misrepresent so much God is saying to the people of the world, if you do your best to keep the faith, and live a decent life, whoever you are, whatever your background, wherever you have come from, I will gather You in, to be My family.

God redefines Israel's relationship with the rest of the world. God's saving love is for all. In God's Kingdom, membership will be based not on genetics or cultural customs, or even religion, but rather on behaviour. All will fit under the umbrella of God's love. Do justly, and behave with righteousness towards God and others, to keep God's holy day, and to hold fast to God's promises. That is what the Lord requires. Those who live this will be accepted in God's house of prayer. This Old Testament reading demonstrates for any who encounter it God's immeasurable generosity. And the challenge it brings with it to us when we ask of ourselves, of our politicians, of our country, of our world: how do we treat the foreigner and the outcast?

It couldn't be more pertinent than it is today. Antisemitism; Islamophobia; misogyny; ageism; homophobia; poor treatment of those with disability; racism. God's radical vision for a world that includes, where God gathers in everyone, isn't to be filed under the category of, "Oh, wouldn't that be nice." It has implications for all of us. From 600BC to the 2026AD

It is a lesson recurring, and we need to keep learning and relearning it. I wonder, is that part of the awkward point in Jesus' ministry when He encounters the Canaanite woman. Another outsider, different in ethnicity, heritage and religion; even her gender separated her from Jewish Jesus and His disciples. And her daughter was possessed by a demon. Beyond the polite periphery in so many ways for Jesus. But Scripture continues to underline a point. When God says all are welcome, all means all. This story is not about Jesus taking the initiative for a mission to the non-Jews and Gentiles, it is about a Gentile woman taking the initiative to encounter Jesus. She shows what faith is, and highlights once more God's immeasurable generosity. What she says demonstrates her faith for she understands Who she speaks to. He is the Son of David; she calls Him, 'Lord' three times. *"Have mercy on me, O Lord."* The *Kyrie Eleison* prayer that has rung down the ages in liturgies in every Christian tradition. Chanted in cloisters, whispered in hospitals, screamed on battlefields. The cry of the soul in extremis, the raw witness to the depth and the misery of the human condition in dire straits.ⁱⁱ For Jesus, mercy was the cornerstone of His mission. Yet here, and it grates on our ears, He is first silent, and His disciples are offensive towards her. She persists. He then tells her His mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel. She persists. He calls her a dog, a familiar and favourite insult of the Israelites for Canaanites. She persists. *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."*

Again and again she violates boundaries of ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender, demon possession and contends with Jesus' own reluctance. But contend she does. She believes she and her

daughter should also benefit from God's immeasurable generosity. And that Jesus should and must have mercy enough for her daughter and herself. All means all, and whatever was the reason for Jesus' glaring blind spot, this persistently faithful woman breaks the barriers down, and Jesus gets the point, and the daughter is healed, and God's Kingdom grew by at least two more souls. There is no one outside the circle of God's love and compassion. We may like our boundaries and limits and restrictions and shibboleths. We act as if God's grace is not for everyone, and that there isn't enough to go around. But this is not God, and it appears even Jesus has to learn and re-learn this. All means all for our gathering God.

I finish with this short poem, **Outwitted**, by Edwin Markham.

*He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!*

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
Amen**

ⁱ David Maxwell, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3, pps338-340*

ⁱⁱ Iwan Russell-Jones, *ibid*, p358