

REFUGEES

Crumbs from our table

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The reading from Matthew's gospel set for today is a tough read. Jesus is approached by a woman who is a foreigner – and described by Matthew as a Canaanite, the ancient enemies of Israel. She's shouting, demanding help for her daughter. The disciples urge Jesus to get rid of this nuisance, and he agrees – 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. You'd have thought that would be enough to put her off, but she comes again, and kneels in front of Jesus. His response – to insult her further, using the racial slur of his day for non-Jews: 'it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. And in her grief and desperation and humility the woman takes the slur, and rather than rejecting it she turns it around: 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table'.



And it is that which makes the difference. Jesus praises her faith, and heals the woman's daughter.

Get rid of them! They're a threat to our identity, our jobs! Pull up the drawbridge, our own resources are just for us! Jesus' disciples, and

Jesus himself, sound in this gospel reading like first century versions of those who are happy to see asylum seekers 'pushed back' – or even left to drown. But that is not where the gospel story ends – and it's not the message of Matthew's gospel. Matthew is the most Jewish gospel – rooted



in the Hebrew Scriptures, arguing passionately that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's promise. For Matthew, this is indeed good news for the house of Israel. But all the way through, from the beginning to the end, there is a counter-theme

of faith coming from unexpected places, from the people who shouldn't be part of the story. From the Gentile women in Jesus' genealogy to the centurion at his death, the story of salvation keeps on including those who were not part of the Jewish people.

There is no Christian option for rejecting those in need. However much we feel the natural and human desire to put up the barriers and lock the doors, the gospel is clear that if we do so we are not following the example of Jesus. Do we want people to pay criminals to enable them to embark on hazardous journeys across the English Channel? Of course not. But while the United Kingdom makes it impossible for people to claim asylum here except by getting into the country – and simultaneously makes it near impossible for anyone to do so – we leave those who are desperate no choice. We force them to accept our prejudiced view, making them 'illegal migrants' by denying any dignified or humane route. We aren't willing to share even crumbs from our table. as a nation we should be praying again in repentance:

We are not worthy

so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.

But you are the same Lord

whose nature is always to have mercy.