

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

Who's in and who's out. I can still remember the thrill when I was chosen to be included in a silly playground game at primary school, because I was one of those boys who was often excluded because I wasn't particularly popular or strong or sporty. I was kind of average at many things, and in the highly charged competitiveness of the school playground, with my peers at lunchtime, it was quite an accolade to be chosen by the dominant group. As I say I remember it well, because it wasn't what usually happened.

Who's in and who's out. We're used to it in British politics, aren't we: who's in government and who's in opposition. We're used to it in the news: who's in favour and who's out of favour; who has dressed well on the red carpet, and whose dress sense has been called disastrous.

Who's in and who's out. Who's played the rules and who's cheated; who's been successful and who's failed; who's been recognised and who's not been noticed.

Who's in and who's out. And in the broader scheme of things, who does God's compassion reach to and who does it not reach to.

You can read the entirety of scripture with this single pertinent question and see it being asked on almost every page.

Who's in and who's out. Who can receive God's mercy and who cannot.

In our Gospel reading today we begin with Jesus arguing with those who held onto and articulated the inherited tradition of the Jews, the pharisees, and throughout the gospel we see Jesus being critical of the pharisees and the pharisees in turn being critical of Jesus, and one of the areas they argued about was who is able to receive God's mercy and grace and who is excluded.

So Jesus leaves the arguments with the pharisees behind and goes to the coastal districts inhabited by the dogs. The dogs was a pejorative term of referring to non-Jews, namely gentiles, and so it was that the Canaanite woman, a gentile recognising and honouring Jesus with the title Son of David, asks for mercy for her tormented daughter. Immediately the disciples wanted Jesus to turn her away but she was persistent and when he tried to explain that he had come to bring bread to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, she doesn't argue with Jesus. That says verse 27: yes lord even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table and of course we've only last week read about the 5 000 who were miraculously fed and that there were 12 baskets of crumbs left over.

Like other gospel stories, here the woman's persistence is rewarded as Jesus says woman great is your faith let it be done for you as you wish and her daughter was healed instantly.

Jane Williams, the theologian after whom our library is named, says whenever we are tempted to make Christianity something small and anxious, we need reminding that even God's crumbs can satisfy us completely.

Who's in and who's out. Who can be healed by God's love and mercy.

Matthew's gospel, written with more references to the old testament than any other, is full of inclusive statements and inclusive stories which clearly illustrate that the gospel of Jesus is for all for Jew and for gentile equally. It is Matthew's gospel that includes gentiles in the genealogy of Jesus and tells the story of the gentile magi bringing gifts at Jesus' birth. It is Matthew's gospel that tells other stories of Jesus healing in gentile areas but in the early church the arguments continued about who was in and who was out.

Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, writes consistently about this reminding the churches of the generosity and indiscriminate nature of God's mercy and grace and perhaps we can be tempted almost smugly to think to ourselves that we already understand and appreciate what it is to be inclusive. But do we.

I believe that we've heard too much recently about institutional and cultural racism and inherited privilege to jump easily and quickly to that conclusion. In Jesus' day his Jewish culture negatively stereotyped all gentiles even of different ethnic backgrounds. His culture disadvantaged children and women. His culture demonised tax collectors.

Therefore throughout his ministry we find Jesus consistently regarding referencing and affirming just those groups the groups that in his inherited culture were stigmatized, scapegoated, discarded, bullied, teased.

Jesus affirms and values children women and gentiles and tax collectors so I wonder where our sticking points are. Who do we find it difficult to accept and love in the way that Jesus would?

It wasn't something that Jesus preached about; rather it was something that he demonstrated by the way in which he lived his life; by the way in which he chose his friends; how he spent his time. And here as often I'm preaching firstly to myself recognising my privilege due to factors beyond my control: my country of birth, my ethnicity, my language, my sex, my upbringing, my job to name a few.

Again to quote Jane Williams, she says perhaps we need a Canaanite woman to come and ask us impertinent questions because the simple truth of the matter is that Christians too often fail to see the scope of what God has intended and will bring to pass. God's call is what brings us into being and his gift is to make that real by sharing with us his own life, so in a moment when we stretch out our hands or pray in the silence of our hearts to receive the gift of Jesus's broken body, given for each of us, may we also receive a fresh vision of what God intends for each of us at this time. What God intends and will bring to pass for us individually and as a church. Amen.