

Countries like the U.S.A., Britain, Australia and many other countries spend millions of dollars on guards and border security to keep out illegal migrants and to monitor refugees and asylum seekers who want to gain access to a better life. These people risk their lives crossing rivers or seas or cooped up in container lorries, where lack of air and water can tragically result in death. Throughout the world there are millions of refugees fleeing poverty, violence, persecution. They dream of getting on the inside – of gaining access to a “promised land” of safety, freedom, prosperity, security.

The woman in today’s gospel was a foreigner who wanted to have a share in the benefits of the chosen people. She was an alien who wanted to be treated as a citizen – “one of us”, not “one of them”. So why did Jesus seem so unwilling to let her in? There is no doubt that Jesus was very conscious that his mission initially was to his own people, but here he would seem to be making a powerful point for his disciples. He pushes the woman to the limit and in doing so reminds them of how easy it is to reject and dismiss others out of sheer prejudice. She displays extraordinary courage and dignity and as Jesus cures her he draws attention to her great faith. So he demonstrates that he had come for men and women of every race and colour in every time and place. As so often happens in these encounters between Jesus and an individual person we see that Jesus himself was profoundly moved by the experience. It is inconceivable that Jesus would have insulted this Canaanite woman. Once again part of the force of the message about the dogs – or more correctly “the pups” – was for the benefit of the disciples. If Jesus was smiling and teasing the woman, we might better understand her chirpy response and Jesus’ delight at it.

It would take a long time for the lesson to be learnt even by the disciples. The arguments about what was required of gentile people surfaced repeatedly and is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Saint Paul. This is perfectly illustrated in today’s short passage from Romans, where, like Jesus, Paul is hoping that his work for those not of his own race, will prompt his own people to come to their senses.

Today's gospel challenges us about our priorities in life and the extent to which we treat others as outsiders. Are our priorities all centred on self, on making our own lives comfortable and easy? Or are other people at the heart of our lives? Do we have time for others or do our priorities mean we ignore their needs?

Charity certainly begins at home. We can ask ourselves about the quality of our relationships – and of the time we spend – with those who are nearest and dearest to us. We might ask if we restrict our love, our time and compassion to our own people. Or can our love extend beyond these narrow limits? Charity might begin at home, but it shouldn't end there.

The gospel also asks us to see if we are willing to change, to set aside our plans in order to respond to the real needs of people. If we think we are too old or too set in our ways to change, it may mean we have stopped growing, or worse, that we are closing our eyes and ears to the needs of others. It is easy to demonise others, to depict them in ways which deny their basic humanity, so that we can ignore their needs. The gospel challenges us to look beyond labels, to see the common humanity of the person who is different, the stranger, and to respond with generosity.

Have a care for justice and cling to the Lord's covenant, Isaiah tells us. *Have a care for justice:* be fair, honest and generous in our dealings with others – not just those close to us, but all God's children. *Keep the Lord's covenant:* acknowledge the Lord in our life.

If we act with justice towards others and make room for God in our lives, he promises that he will give us a deep joy, he will hear our prayers and accept not just our sacrifices, but our very selves. Then we will not be foreigners, aliens to God, but rather insiders, members of his chosen people.