

This short act of worship has been produced for you by
Revd Kathleen Richardson.

If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church and pray for them as they pray for you.

Our readings today are about who is invited to God's table.

Many people have really missed the opportunity in these last months to be present at a service of Holy Communion, the ritual that reminds us that our place at the table was bought for us in the body and blood of Jesus. But God's table is not limited to a particular place and time, or with a special group of people. God's invitation is for all people at all times. I use one of the Communion hymns in Singing the Faith (581) as a call to worship.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come, my table is a meeting place, here I'm waiting ready for you,
come and share, you are invited, come, beloved, I chose you.

Come, my table is a feeding place, bread, my body broken for you,
wine, my blood poured out to save you, given eternally for you.

Come, my table is a touching place, hands to greet you span time and space, see my arms stretched out in welcome, this for you a holy place.

Come and meet me in this moment, taste and see this gift of my grace,
here, the feast spread out before you, come, my child, and take your place.

HYMN **Singing the Faith 685**

John Oxenham

In Christ there is no east or west

Read/Pray/Proclaim the words

<https://youtu.be/zfNlboxvXbus>

In Christ there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of love,
throughout the whole wide earth.

In him shall true hearts everywhere
their high communion find;
his service is the golden cord
close binding humankind.

Join hands then all the human race,
whate'er your nation be;
all children of the living God
are surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both east and west,
in him meet south and north;
all Christlike souls are one in him,
throughout the whole wide earth.

PRAYER

God of all people

In mystery and silence you are present in our lives, bringing new life out of destruction, hope out of despair and growth out of difficulty.

We gather across space and time to worship you. We come with our different histories, abilities, experiences, insights, hopes and fears and find in you our meeting place.

We come to rejoice in your loving power which overcomes the barriers we have inherited and those we build between ourselves.

We come to celebrate together, to receive forgiveness from our sins and to hear the good news of your kingdom of love. Renew us with your Holy Spirit, that we may trust you and act on the understanding that you are at work within our lives, to your glory.

Amen

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of truth and mercy, we make our confession:

We have not always done what is right; we have despised those that are different; refused to welcome the stranger and the needy; mocked the prayers and devotions of others, and turned away from calls asking for our help.

We have put limitations on our involvement in our local communities, been too selective in our response to cries for help.

Forgive us, renew our confidence in your power of love to change lives, and give us courage to be instruments of your love for others.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

The good news is that God forgives us. Let us accept with joy the gift of abundant life.

Thanks be to God

READINGS

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.

Let the peoples praise you, O God: let all the peoples praise you.
Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God: let all the peoples praise you.
The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.
May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Matthew 15: 21 – 28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out

and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon “.

But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us”. He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel”. But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me”. He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”. She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table”. Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish”. And her daughter was healed instantly.

REFLECTION

When Matthew was writing his gospel, it was against the background of the early church which was having to face the theologically difficult question of Christian identity. After Pentecost the early Christian church grew rapidly in synagogues outside Palestine. There were problems from the start between the Hebrew speaking congregations and the Greek speaking Jews. Then as Gentiles were drawn to the new faith the question arose as to whether or not it was necessary to become a Jew first. The early Church had a major council about this in Jerusalem around the year 50 and agreed it was not, Paul saying,

“We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, as will they.”

Matthew is writing with this in mind, primarily to the Jewish churches, some of whom were still resistant to the thought that the laws and observances of Judaism could be set aside.

This perhaps helps to understand the background to this passage.

Let's see.

Matthew tells that Jesus and his disciples left that place, moving further north out of Galilee and out of Israel. He left behind crowds longing to be fed and healed, and teachers of the law wanting to discredit him and his teaching. So, he and his closest disciples retreated for a while into the district of Tyre and Sidon.

I wonder if, as they went into that area, they talked to one another of events in the history of the Jewish people that had occurred there. One of the famous stories was about the prophet Elijah, whose life was saved by the generosity of a Canaanite woman. Elijah escaped a great famine in Israel and went north. In the village of Zarephath he asked a Canaanite woman for bread. She said she had enough only for herself and her son but prompted by God, Elijah asked her to feed him first, then she would have enough left until the rains came. They all

survived the famine. Then, when the widow's son became ill, Elijah healed him. Her response was “Now I know you are a man of God and the word of the Lord is in your mouth.”

Here, maybe in that same village, some 800 years later, there is another meeting with a Canaanite woman, who comes to Jesus asking for his help and calling him, Lord, Son of David. No one responds immediately. Then the disciples say to Jesus “Send her away, she's shouting”. Jesus speaks to the disciples, not to her, “My business is with the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She persists, “Lord, help me.” Then Jesus says this strange thing that could so easily be felt to be offensive “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” But the response of the woman is not, “Who are you calling a dog?” She accepts the argument but reminds him that when the children have been fed, enough bread falls from the table to satisfy those who do not have a seat at it. And Jesus commends her faith, her wish is granted and her daughter healed.

What did Jesus mean? It is worth noting that this is not his first healing of a Gentile. He had already healed the Gentile servant of a Roman centurion and commended the centurion's faith.

In Mark's telling of this same story, Jesus makes it clear that he means the gospel is for the Jews first, then the whole world.

Luke does not include it at all – perhaps thinking it not suitable for a gentile readership!

Matthew, while recognising that God’s purposes are for the whole world, seems to suggest that until the Messiahship of Jesus is fulfilled in the Cross and Resurrection, it is the people of Israel that are the holders of the secret. In his next chapter when Peter announces that he believes Jesus is the Messiah, he is told not to tell anyone.

In Matthew’s understanding of the mission of Israel it is the Cross and Resurrection that will reveal this to the world. This was God’s offering of himself for the salvation of all on earth.

It is perhaps a good reminder to us that the Bible is clear that the gospel is for everyone, but it comes to us through God’s long work of preparation within Israel. Relationships between the churches and Judaism have sometimes been strained, and the Hebrew Scriptures diminished by calling them the Old Testament as though they have little value for us. But they tell the story of God’s eternal purposes and they sustained the ministry of Jesus.

One other aspect of Matthew’s gospel amazes me. Matthew records the family tree of Jesus the Messiah - 42 generations

traced through the male lines starting with Abraham. Only five mothers are mentioned, probably all Gentiles and three certainly of Canaanite origin, all with interesting stories of their own to tell in the history of Israel.

Here is another - Jesus said “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish”.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

A few moments of quiet thankfulness and recognition of our faith, bringing personal needs and the needs of those we know before God.

Gracious God, you have no favourites, your eternal love reaches out to everyone. But many are kept from experiencing the fullness of that love and for these we pray now:

- For all men and women whose lives are lived outside the knowledge of your love through ignorance, arrogance or unbelief
- For those who have only heard the gospel preached in hard and narrow ways which limit your love and make it conditional
- For those whose faith has become a habit which does not save them from doubt and fear and emptiness of spirit

- For those deprived of love by the cruelty and indifference of other people, or turned away because they are different

We pray for the lands of the Bible

- for the region of Tyre and Sidon – modern Lebanon. We remember the suffering and corruption and uncertainty there, and pray for healing and hope
- for the nation of Israel and the Palestinian authorities, and the work of Christian churches in reconciliation
- for Syria and the work of refugee organisations

As we prepare as churches to renew our service to our communities, help us to find new ways to be creatively inclusive and to be communities of healing and hope.

We pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen

The Lord's prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come;

thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory
for ever and ever. **Amen**

HYMN **Singing the Faith 416** *Frederick William Faber*

There's a wideness in God's mercy

Read/Pray/Proclaim the words

<https://youtu.be/kamADrIPEDs>

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice
which is more than liberty.

There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed;
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the Head.

There is grace enough for thousands
of new worlds as great as this;
there is room for fresh creations
in that upper home of bliss.

For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make our love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.

If our love were but more simple,
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined
by the presence of our Lord.

BLESSING

Let us live within the circle of God's love,
that the love of Christ may nourish us
and the Holy Spirit be our power and grace.

Amen

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