

Sunday 16th August, Trinity 10.

Belonging

Matt 15: 21-28

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8

[Romans 11:1-2a & 29-32]

Part 1 (between Psalm and Collect)

A question:

Which organisations, or institutions, or even administrative regions do you belong to?

Have a think. If you have a piece of paper to hand, maybe write them down. If you're with others, maybe compare your thoughts.

There are no right or wrong answers. It's just to get us thinking.....

Part 2 (between 1st reading and Gospel)

Another question:

Which groups of people do you belong to?

Again, no right or wrong answers. Have a think, write them down, maybe chat if you're with someone else.....

Part 3 (after the Gospel)

So, today we are thinking about belonging.

I wonder what you came up with when you were thinking about belonging to organisations or institutions or the like?

On my list were things like the National Trust; far too many email mailing lists; the General Pharmaceutical Council, which is the registration body I have to belong to in order to practise as a pharmacist; and that I am a UK citizen.

And on my other list – the one about belonging to groups of people, I've got family, various friendship groups, the sad group of individuals who support the England cricket team – and my Church family.

Of course, when we look at the lists, then we realise that actually, they aren't quite mutually exclusive and there's a lot of overlap; but I think in general terms there is a distinction

The first list is largely contractual. It's based on the idea that if I do "this", then the other party will do "that". If I pay the National Trust £x per year, then they will use it in a particular way and I will get free admission to their properties (virus permitting) etc etc. With the email – I give them my email address; they send me stuff I'm interested in (and maybe money off vouchers from time to time!). It's very much founded in rights and responsibilities.

The second list – the people one – is much more relational. Rights and responsibilities still feature, but not because I "must" observe them (as in a contract) but because I want to - because I love and care about these people, because I have a relationship, an emotional tie, with them.

I belong to, and with them, in a very different way from the way in which I belong to the National Trust. (Even if, with England cricket, it's a bit of a love/hate relationship at times!)

Belonging is very important to human beings. Thinking back to our early ancestors, being part of a group meant security and protection, and enhanced the ability to survive. "Safety in numbers" and all that.

But as Christians we also recognise another reason why belonging is so important to us. We worship one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The very essence of God is relationship and community. And being made in the image of God, relationship is core to who we are. In Genesis 2 we read

"Then the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

And I am sure we all have positive examples of how "belonging" has enhanced our lives – in both its relationship and contractual senses. In my own life, there have been more times than I can count when the support of friends and family has kept me afloat. I am very grateful that SMBC organises for my bins to be emptied each week. When my children were small, the national Child Benefit Scheme made a significant difference to our household finances. And the NHS – well, do we consider that as a contract, or a relationship? Somewhere between the two, I suspect.

But equally, I am sure we also all have negative examples around the idea of belonging. Being last to be picked for the team in PE classes at school. Discovering that we were on the wrong end of gossip. Finding out that we weren't on the guest list. Or just generally "not fitting in." When my elder son was a baby we lived on the outskirts of Plymouth, which was still a big naval city in those days. Between the people whose experience was only of naval life, and those who thought that the edge of the world really was just the other side of Exeter, this northern lass with no Services heritage felt more than a bit of an outsider.

How much worse it must be if the reason that you feel you don't "fit in" is because of your innate make-up; something about who you are - your gender, colour, or ethnicity.

Which brings us to the strange story of the Canaanite woman which we have just revisited in our Gospel reading.

What is going on here? A woman asks for help and far from welcoming her, Jesus' initial words and actions really don't sound very – well – Christ-like.

To understand what's happening, we need to do a quick trip back into the Old Testament.

As we have been thinking about in our midweek reflections, God chose a people, the descendants of Abraham, for a particular and special relationship with Himself. He made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and used Jacob's son Joseph to rescue the people from the famine by providing a home for them in Egypt. He chose Moses to rescue them from Pharaoh, and began to shape them into the people he wanted them to be whilst they were on their way to the Promised Land.

He gave his people a way of living – which we call the Ten Commandments.

He gave them principles to keep them safe, both physically and spiritually. There is some great infection prevention advice in the laws which the Israelites were given (as well as some rather odd stuff).

He warned them about the importance of remaining spiritually faithful, including separating themselves from those who worshipped other gods, particularly those who were already living in Canaan and had their own religion.

And God told them the way to worship – the way to maintain their particular and special relationship with him. The system of sacrifices to keep God first and central in their individual and community life, and to restore that relationship when it was (inevitably) broken.

And the purpose of all this was so that as God's chosen people, they would reveal his love and power, glory and majesty to the world – all based, not on a contract, but on their relationship with Him.

“You will be my people, and I will be your God.”

The word used to describe this arrangement was not contract, but covenant. An agreement based on relationship.

Later on, when things were going badly wrong, one of God's prophets, Hosea, describes this covenant in terms of marriage relationship. Yes, it features rights and responsibilities, but these are based not on contractual terms (on either side) but on the desire to observe them. An arrangement based on love, consent and flourishing. A family.

But the Israelites interpreted it as a contract. Rather than seeing it as family, they saw it more as “business associates.” In very crude terms, “If we observe all the rules, then God will give us wealth and power.”

And in the midst of all this, “belonging to...” became a rigid ‘in’ or ‘out’.

So – back to the story.....

Under this interpretation, the Canaanites as a race were very definitely ‘out.’

And I think we have to see Jesus here ‘playing along’ with this interpretation so he could teach his followers, his disciples, an important lesson. They want her sent away because according to the way they have been brought up to see things, her race makes her an ‘out’ person.

Jesus sees not her race but her heart. He sees that she is not just coming to him for a transactional “I will do this, if you will do that” reason. She is coming to him because she sees in him someone with whom she wishes to align herself. She recognises that here is someone worth following. She calls him Lord. She is seeking not just a miracle, but a relationship.

For when Jesus says, as the disciples expect him to, “go away – you’re not one of us” – she subverts their story. She moves it from contract to relationship. She says, “Well, I’m not one of the family round the table. But the family isn’t just those at the table. It includes the pet dogs who also get fed.” She is staking her claim to be part of God’s family.

And Jesus heals her daughter, and demonstrates to the disciples that God is about relationship rather than rules. That what matters to God is not ethnicity (or any of the other many things that human beings use to divide ‘in’ from ‘out’) but the desire for a relationship with Him.

He is demonstrating the reality of the passage from Isaiah we heard earlier.

‘And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord....’ ie those who ‘buy in’ to the relationship

these I will bring to my holy mountain’ ie ‘into my presence’, ‘into my family’. They will belong to me.

So – what about us?

Do we see God as family? Or as a business associate?

Is the way we understand and respond to God based on loving relationship? Or contract?

Is it based on loving God with our whole being? Putting him first and centre in our lives – and allowing him to love us. (That last part is maybe the hardest)

Or is it based on contract? “I’ll be good, go to church, say my prayers, if you will answer my prayers as I want and stop bad things happening to me and those I love.”

And of course – those are the extremes, quoted to make a point. It’s a range between the two, and I would be astonished if anyone listening to or reading this is at either end. But it is worth thinking about where on the scale we might be. And personally, I’m pretty sure that as I work on moving closer to the relationship end, then the more of the love and beauty of God I see and experience in my own life. The more I am aware that God is drawing me on, his arms outstretched in welcome.

Because in a marvellous, amazing and miraculous way, Jesus not only welcomes the Canaanite woman – he welcomes us too. Through his death and resurrection he offers us a new “covenant” – the new promise of belonging, based on faith and trust in him, which we celebrate in the Eucharist.

And through which he says, “This is where you belong.”