

Psalm 86 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 St. Matthew 15:21-28

Holy Dogs

This past Sunday we heard, via Chip Kirk, from little six-year old Kumar, a Dalit child. If you recall, when asked if he attended school Kumar replied that he did, but only to clean toilets...he was not allowed to go to class with the other children simply because he was a member of the lowest caste in India...the Dalits. This little boy was denied an elementary education because he happened to be born at the bottom of the hierarchical structure of Hindu society. Two weeks ago, as you know, I was in India and, for the most part, I was in the company of hundreds of little Kumars...the most beautiful little children running around, giggling, throwing flowers at me and wanting to shake my hand. I asked many of them what they wanted to be when they grew up one day...for the most part, all I got was a blank stare...very few could even conceive of being anything other than what they already were...dogs, outcastes, unclean, untouchable and defiled. So, with the help of my new-found friend, Pastor Swamydas, we would encourage these children to dream...dream of the future...dream of what they could become if they were willing to think outside the confines of this social entrapment.

I couldn't help but think about the Dalits as I read our Gospel lesson for today about the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus seeking healing for her daughter. She was just like a Dalit...a dog, an outcaste, unclean, untouchable and defiled...and she was well aware of the fact. Even the disciples seemed to be disturbed by her presence as they urged our Lord to send her away. I thought of this as I was confronted with so many desperate people in India...after a while the overwhelming need makes you wish the Lord would send them away too...but in many cases, all these people wanted was for me to touch

them...to pray for them...to make them sense that someone cares for them...that Jesus cares for them. And really that is the only way out of this prison of social degradation. As we heard last week, Hinduism claims that not all men are created equal...that the four distinct caste systems were created out of descending body parts of Brahma, a Hindu Deity...but the Dalits were not – they do not even feature in this scheme and are thus esteemed as sub-human. So, the Christian teaching that all men are equal as all have been created in the image of God and that, through the substitutionary death of Jesus on behalf of mankind, broken mankind can be restored to full communion with God in this life, rather than an endless cycle of rebirths, is extremely liberating for the Dalits. The same was true for the Canaanite woman...liberation for her and her daughter could only come through Jesus.

But while this is obviously more pronounced in the case of the Canaanite woman and, indeed, the Dalits or any other oppressed people group, this is true for us all. Because of what happened in Genesis chapter three...because our collective forebears sold us out to satan through their sin...we are all, as the Prayer Book says, not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under our Lord's Table. In this sense, we are all dogs, outcastes, unclean, untouchable and defiled. Or as St. Paul would say, we have all sinned and we all fall short of the glory of God. But...the Gospel proclaims to all and sundry that our Lord's character is such that He is always inclined to have mercy on all who call on His Name.

This is the crystal clear message of our Psalm for today, Psalm 86. The Psalm itself is a form of liturgical prayer...a lament, if you will, of David, crying out to God for mercy. But, as with many of the other Psalms, this Psalm is structured in such a way as to cause

the reader to change their perspective on the trials of life in spite of the fact that those very trials may not be removed. This structure has a fancy name...it is called a chiastic structure...and the idea behind this rather common form of Hebrew poetry is to ascend up to a focal point (a central statement of faith, if you will) and then to descend from that focal point with the descending verses roughly mirror imaging the ascending verses.

But what is so amazing about this structure is that it very effectively alerts us to the fact that while the circumstances behind the reason for the prayer in the first place (the ascending verses) – while these circumstances may remain very much the same (shown in the parallel descending verses), our attitude towards them and our reaction towards them are fundamentally altered once we have focused our attention, not on the circumstances, but on the greatness of the God we serve. So, while the final verse of the Psalm shows no apparent sign of a positive reply to the prayer for help, the Psalmist's faith that his God alone is God has been reinforced.

Perhaps it would help you to better understand this if we first looked at the central focal point which, in this case, is found in verses 10 and 11. Look at those verses with me, please. "For You are great, and do wondrous things; You alone are God. Teach me Your way, O Lord and I will walk in Your truth; Unite my heart (or give me singleness of heart) to fear Your name." This is the high point...the summit of the Psalm, if you will. The confession that God alone is God...that there is no other force in the entire universe greater than Him...this confession is in itself a life changing confession that dramatically affects the way we view our circumstances. But the fear of God, as Proverbs tells us, is the beginning of all wisdom. Thus to not only acknowledge that the One to Whom you are addressing your prayer is the only true God out there, but also to then ask that one

true God to make the fear of His Name the focal point of your very being is to ask Him to help us see things in their proper perspective...to see things from His perspective...the perspective that all things not only exist because He willed them into existence, but they also remain in existence because He wills it so...He created all things and sustains all things...He alone upholds all things by the word of His power. So, not only are you in the palm of His hands, but so also are the circumstances causing your distress.

In application, when we look at this from the perspective of our Dalit brethren, we will see that in the eyes of their predominantly Hindu society, they are and always will be dogs. Like the Canaanite woman would always be a Canaanite woman in the eyes of some, so the Dalits will always be Dalits in the eyes of the upper castes. However, when they accept the one true God as their God...even though humanly speaking there may be no visible or tangible change...there is a fundamental change in reality from their point of view because they have moved their citizenship from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light...they have moved from error to truth...from the lies of satan that they are sub-human to the liberating affirmation that they have been made in the image of God. They have moved from a position of unworthiness to a position of worthiness because the one true God has, through His self-sacrificial act in Jesus, declared them to be worthy. This is the reason why many Dalits are willing to give up their lives rather than deny Jesus...this is why many are turning to Jesus because in Him they receive their true identity...children of God, bought with an incalculable price. This is why it is so extremely important for us to continue to get the Gospel message out to them (not to mention a great privilege for us as a church to be involved in the eternal liberation!), so that they may be set free from the prison cell of Hindu philosophy...and that they might

have hope...that their children may be freed to dream dreams outside of the confined space of fatalism or karma...of non-ambition...or hopelessness. (We must remember that many Dalit children may only obtain an education through a Christian School such as we wish to help start in our churches in Andhra Pradesh.)

Now, having said that, this Psalm, does of course, address us as well. You may be facing circumstances, dearest brethren, which in spite of your many prayers have largely remained the same. This may be an illness, or a vocational situation, or a relational difficulty...or perhaps a spiritual crisis...whatever...but something that has bothered you enough to make it a matter of fervent and persistent prayer. Like the Psalmist, you too need to ascend to the point of faith where you are able to realize that your God alone is God...He is the highest authority there is...there is no one and nothing greater than Him. And then, in the light of this confession, you need to ask Him to teach you His ways and to grant you singleness of heart to fear His Name, regardless of your particular life situation, because then you too will be enabled to walk in His truth. Circumstances may be what they are, but once you see them through the eyes of a God Who is infinitely compassionate, caring, loving, kind, merciful and forgiving, the manner in which you respond to them will be fundamentally different.

And I believe that this is what Jesus meant by telling us that as often as we partake of the Eucharist we should remember Him. You see, Jesus is the apex of the Psalm of human history, if you will...He is the climax of all time. Like the ascending verses of the Psalm, the Old Testament era looked forward to the ultimate revelation of God's merciful dealings with mankind...and like the descending verses of the Psalm, the New Testament era descends from the heights of that perfect unveiling of His heart with a renewed

perspective. Yes, for all intents and purposes, not much has changed. We still sin, we still suffer, we still die...people are still selfish, self-centered, self-absorbed, and blind to the truth...but the view from the cross...that great focal point of history...has changed our perspective for eternity. Because of our Lord's sacrifice of Himself, once offered for the sins of the whole world, we no longer need be slaves to sin, satan and death...we no longer need be alienated from God...we no longer need be in the kingdom of darkness...we can now be children of God and we can walk in the light of that reality. We can be free, eternally liberated.

So, while we may struggle through the week with our unchanged circumstances, the Eucharist once again serves to draw our attention back to the amazing character of our God...the one true God...the only God...the only God Who has actually done something to remedy the predicament of humanity through the sending of His Son to take our penalty for sin upon Himself and to absorb our death sentence by dying in our place. Here His love and care for you is demonstrated most clearly...so think on this – if there is only one thing you remember of this sermon, let it be this: if He once gave His life for you, would He abandon you now?

So, as you come to partake of the elements that shine forth His love for you, ask Him to teach you His ways...ask Him to grant you singleness of heart so that you might truly fear His Name...and then leave His Table to walk in His truth.