

**SERMON AT 8.00 AM HOLY COMMUNION (BCP) AT  
ST AGNES' CHURCH, FRESHWATER BAY ON SUNDAY  
20<sup>TH</sup> AUGUST 2017 (10<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY) BY  
JAMES COOK**

**Readings: Romans 11.1-2a, 29-32 and Matthew 15.10-28**

**Title: 'Not Rejected'**

**Aim: To help us to deal with feelings of rejection.**

Can you remember an occasion when you were refused entry to an event or an organisation because you did not possess the right ticket or entry qualification? [Examples]

Our feelings are aroused when we are excluded from a group. We might feel embarrassed, angry, disappointed, foolish or frustrated.

Today's Bible readings address the issue of rejection: the pain we feel and the ways in which rejection may be overcome.

In our Epistle Reading, Paul writes about the position of the Jewish people. Most of them, Paul admits with great sadness, have rejected Jesus as their Messiah, but has God therefore rejected them? Not so, says Paul emphatically. "God has not rejected his people whom he

foreknew...The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable,” he says.

The Gentiles to whom Paul writes had once rejected God, but now they have received him through faith in Jesus. In due time, the Jews will do the same. This Biblical teaching has sometimes been forgotten, but it remains true. The time will come when the Jewish people will become united with Gentiles in one faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is, I suggest, our Christian duty to pray for that day.

In our Gospel reading, we glimpse how Jesus faces up to the cultural and religious separation between Jew and non-Jew in his day.

Jesus begins by tackling the question of how Jewish people should observe their religion. God has commanded them to live lives devoted to him and free from worship of other gods. In order to remind them of their separation from pagan peoples, various practices have been established to ensure ritual purity. By the time of Jesus, these practices had become so pernicky, according to the rules laid down by the Pharisees, that their original purpose had been forgotten. Jesus wants people to observe the spirit of God’s law, not simply to abide by the letter.

The Pharisees, one of the leading Jewish religious sects of the time, had established complicated rules regarding the cleansing and use of cutlery and crockery, attempting to ensure that what they ate and drank kept them ritually clean.

These rules were beyond the ability of ordinary people to comply with, and must have left them feeling rejected. There is a question for us: do some of our church rules and practices leave people feeling outsiders and rejected, while doing nothing to give them the heart of the Gospel of Christian love? If so, are we willing to see man-made rules and traditions relegated to a lower order of importance?

While requiring adherence to petty rules about what went into their mouths, the Pharisees, it seems, were not always concerned about what came out. It is what comes out of our mouths, says Jesus, which is important to God, not so much what goes in. By our words and our behaviour, we may reveal that we do not care deeply about the sins that God cares about: evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness and slander. Jesus names just some of the things that defile people and that we sometimes treat with indifference. When we behave this way, it is those outside the Church who question whether our Christian faith is genuine.

Having addressed some shortcomings in Jewish religious behaviour that we as Christians sometimes pick up, Jesus is then confronted by a challenge from a Canaanite woman: a member of an ethnic group despised by Jews at that time. She is living in the district of Tyre and Sidon, north of Galilee and a place where Jesus could expect some rest from his ministry, which was primarily to the Jewish people. The woman wants him to heal her sick daughter, just as he has healed Jewish children.

At first, Jesus refuses, and we wonder why. Is Jesus the man, weary and reluctant to go outside his normal boundaries, or is he trying to stretch the woman's faith in God? We cannot be sure.

The woman displays considerable persistence and wisdom in dealing with rejection, and we might learn from her example:

1. The woman shows respect for Jesus and his Jewish faith. She calls him 'Lord, Son of David' and she kneels at his feet. Do we show deep respect for those of another religion?
2. She does not ask for more than her entitlement, merely asking for crumbs from the table. Might we be more successful in our dealings with others if we are very modest in our demands?

Jesus responds with his usual great compassion by commending her great faith and saying, “May it be done to you as you wish.”

The woman’s daughter is healed instantly. In a time of challenge for both Jew and non-Jew, persistence, courtesy and faith have prevailed. As we confront our own insecurities and those of others from a different background, may we too know God’s healing and reconciliation. Amen.