

## **My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples**

I wonder if, like me, you saw a photo in the news of Buraq Ahmed who arrived in the UK from Iraq aged three. He was pictured receiving the A level grades he needs to go to medical school. He has apparently had multiple operations for medical problems and it sounds as if he will make a sensitive and compassionate doctor and be a credit to his adopted country. Or perhaps I should say, to us. He seems to be someone in transition from being one of 'Them' who come to this country to 'Us', we who are part of the country. It's an interesting distinction.

The Israelites of Isaiah's generation clearly demarcated 'Us' from 'Them.' Jews were 'Us' and everyone else 'Them.' The laws and traditions - keeping the Sabbath, kosher food, sacrificing in the temple, obeying the law and revering the land of Israel all served to demonstrate the difference between 'Us' and 'Them', and keep the Israelites intact as a distinctive people. In our own culture food, language, and race often preserve the perceived distinctions between 'Us' and 'Them'.

Interestingly in today's passage from Isaiah<sup>1</sup> God advocates a different approach. 'All the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,' God says to Isaiah, 'these will I bring to my Holy Mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.' and later, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.' That is not what Isaiah and the chosen people were expecting to hear, nor was it necessarily welcome. Not just the just the Israelites, God insists, but all nations will come to God's temple.

In the days when the choir sang we would hear them chant psalm 24; 'The earth is the Lord's and all that therein is, the compass of the world and they that dwell therein' and in today's psalm, we said, 'Let the peoples praise you God, let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations rejoice and be glad.' Do we behave as if 'the earth is the Lord's?' as if all the peoples of the earth are our brothers and sisters in praising God? David's psalms claim the earth not for any nation but for God and all the nations of the earth. It would take another 600 years before Paul of Tarsus would begin to preach salvation through Jesus Christ to all nations, but even in the time of Isaiah God had revealed himself as the God of all the nations. And yet there is a deep-seated tribalism in all of us – a tendency to think in terms of 'us' and 'them' and the danger of thinking in those terms is that we can de-humanise each other.

The culture within which Jesus lived had largely forgotten Isaiah's revelation that there is no 'Us' and 'Them' in God's house. The Jewish world of the first century was viewed as clean or unclean, Jew or Gentile. So when Jesus spoke to the Canaanite woman, he crossed multiple boundaries. She was a gentile woman to whom he had not been introduced by her husband or father. And his initial response was to retreat behind cultural boundaries. He told her 'I am sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,' his revelation and the healing reserved only for the Jews, God's chosen people.

But as they talked and he recognised the depth of her faith and hope, he appears to have changed his mind. At the end he says to her; 'your faith is great. Let it be done for you as you wish.' It is a change of heart which changes the course of history. Jesus recognises himself – and will soon be recognised by others – as the revelation of God not just to Jews, to those whom he and his disciples would call 'Us,' but to rest of the world – to 'Them.' I don't think Paul could have written in his letter to the Galatians 'There is neither

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 56.1, 6-8

Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female' without the basis of Jesus' own countercultural universality. It is backed up by the extraordinary response he gave to the Pharisees earlier in the same chapter. 'It's not what goes into the mouth which defiles but that which comes out.' This is countercultural to the point of blasphemy. In traditional orthodox circles the strict dietary laws helped to define what it was to be a Jew, the chosen people. Jesus' declaration was inflammatory and appalled the religious authorities. It is sayings like this that led the high priest to conclude, 'It is better that one man should die for the people than that the whole nation should perish.'

We are also called on occasion to be countercultural - not about dietary laws but about the just treatment of those whom we may see as 'Them.' I started with Burach Ahmed. Let me finish with three questions to which I do not have the answer but which I think we are called to ask:

If the earth is the Lord's,

- Does an accident of birth give us and only us a right to live in this country?
- Do we have a God given right to prevent others from living here?
- If we were to welcome those who have risked their lives to reach this country; gave them education and language skills and a right to work - would that present insuperable problems? Or might it result in a young, committed work force, loyal to the country which they have fought to reach and warmly curious about the Christian values underlying such a welcome? Might that be a way in which 'They' become 'Us'?