

The Accepting Christ

SERMON · Crossing Every Boundary: God's Love for All People · 15 March 2020 (the Third Sunday in Lent)

Luke 23:43 (quoted)

Matthew 15:21-28

Mark 10:48 (quoted)

Mark 9:38 (quoted)

Galatians 2:11-19

Galatians 5:12 (quoted)

2 Peter 3:15-16

The Church of South India is reflecting on a series of four sermon themes this month. Two weeks ago it was The Cleansing Christ, followed by The Forgiving Christ last week. Today we shall consider The Accepting Christ, and next week it will be The Liberating Christ; all four speak of the abundant grace and glory of Jesus Christ, and are fitting themes for this season of Lent.

Today's theme, the Accepting Christ, is about Christ's acceptance of the whole human race, if only we will place our trust and faith in Him, and accept that He is our God and Saviour. As I sat down to write this sermon, one person came to my mind: one of the two malefactors, as Luke calls them, crucified on either side of Christ. We are given no name for him, no knowledge of which people he belonged to, no account of his crimes; but we know that, at the point of death, he confessed and believed that Jesus could forgive him and receive him into heaven. Jesus accepted him, saying, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). This one narrative is proof enough that Jesus came for all, and died to redeem all, Jew and Gentile alike.

There are innumerable narratives in the Bible that show us Jesus came for all, and explicitly expressed His desire to accept all who acknowledge Him. Let us look at the Gospel passage read to us a while ago, from Matthew 15:21-28. This short episode is built around a conversation between Jesus and a Canaanite woman. We begin with the note that Jesus withdrew far up the coast, to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Anyone who knows Jesus would have to say that He was not trying to get away from the difficulties in Israel, and that this was no chance meeting. The Lord was going, deliberately, to this Canaanite region, to this Canaanite woman.

But the conversation, as it unfolds, gives the impression that Jesus was unwilling to grant her request because she was a Canaanite. This is, in fact, a critical part of the narrative, for there is something powerful at work in its ethnic dimension. What is clear is that the woman would not give up, but kept pleading, despite her Canaanite background, until Christ recognised her great faith and openly acknowledged it. The contrast is striking: in

Israel, His own disciples showed her no consideration and simply wanted to be rid of her, at a time when Jesus was trying to convince the Jews that He was the Messiah, and was being pressed to prove it with a sign. Yet here, in Gentile country, He met a woman already convinced that He was the Messiah, and He could not, in the end, refuse her. His apparent reluctance was, therefore, a test, and her great faith must have been a delight to the Saviour.

It is worth returning to the conversation itself, since a casual reading might suggest that Jesus was demeaning the woman. ‘Dog’ was a term the Jews commonly applied to the Gentiles, and the underlying ethnic tension reached back to Old Testament times, to the long conflict between Israel and the Canaanite peoples. In raising this term, Jesus was giving voice to the prevailing Jewish attitude, in order to contrast it with His own. By healing the woman’s daughter, He showed His disapproval of that very attitude. Ironically, many Jews would forfeit God’s blessing and salvation because they rejected Jesus, while many Gentiles would find salvation because they recognised Him as Saviour, and so became heirs of His acceptance.

The story does not end there. Jesus’ own disciples repeatedly failed to grasp that, since there is but one God, He is God for all. The Gospels record more than one occasion on which they, and other Jews nearby, grew irritated when people sought help from the Messiah, wanting Him to send such people away. Take the case of Bartimaeus, a man I like to call the blind man with twenty-twenty vision. He kept crying out to Jesus, unwilling to let the opportunity pass, certain that Jesus, as the Messiah, could heal him. The crowd’s reaction is recorded in Mark 10:48: “And many charged him that he should hold his peace: but he cried the more a great deal, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me.” He was a blind beggar, living on alms, yet God the Son, Jesus, attended to him as an equal. On another occasion, the disciples came to Jesus, and John said, “Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbad him, because he followeth not us” (Mark 9:38). ‘He followeth not us’ meant, in effect, that they considered themselves different, and specially favoured, and thought others were not entitled to the same grace of God.

Much later, once the apostles had begun their work of evangelising, a disagreement arose between Paul and Peter over the baptising of the Gentiles. We see it unfold in Galatians 2:11-19, where Paul rebukes his fellow apostle for yielding to the prejudice of a group who insisted that people of every ethnic background had to satisfy the Jewish ceremonial law

before they could become true Christians: that men, for instance, had to be circumcised, and that no one might eat pork.

Paul was in earnest over this perversion of the gospel. Such demands piled superfluous requirements onto the faith, turning salvation into a matter of performance rather than a gift of mercy and grace received by faith alone. If there is any doubt as to how strongly Paul felt about this error, one need only read Galatians 5:12, where he writes, “I would they were even cut off which trouble you” — in other words, that those insisting on circumcision might as well go further still with the knife.

One might expect that, after such an uncomfortable exchange, the two apostles would have parted ways; hurt feelings have wrecked many a relationship. But Christianity is not only about feelings; it is, necessarily, about truth as well. And Peter recognised that Paul had the truth of the matter, so much so that, in one of his own letters, he commended Paul’s writing as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Coming back to our own time, it pains me to hear some fellow Christians argue that non-Christians forfeit their right to be saved, simply because they do not yet belong to Jesus. I see this as a judgemental attitude. We believe in one God, the Trinity; how, then, can God belong only to Christians? Anyone who has spent time within the Church will recognise this kind of tension even between admirable believers.

Discord is inevitable when finite, fallen creatures join together in a task as large as this one. All Christians are spiritual works in progress; we are being sanctified continually, but none of us is yet perfect, and most of us are still far from it. Alongside our gains in kindness, courage, and grace, we still have our episodes of selfishness, cowardice, and petulance; and despite whatever advance we make in wisdom and knowledge, we are often simply confused.

The Scripture is inerrant, by God’s own superintendence. Through it, and by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we find our way to God in Christ, and learn to walk with Him, bringing the unchurched and the unreached along with us. That is our mission on this earth, as given to us by Jesus, for He does not intend to reject anyone. He is an accepting God.