

Not one of us?

At the beginning of the book of the prophet Isaiah we are presented with a beautiful vision:

In the days that are to come the mountain of the Temple of the Lord shall tower above the mountains and be lifted higher than the hills. All the nations will stream to it, people without numbers will move to it and they will say: Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.

In today's first reading that vision is expressed once more as the prophet places before all people, the invitation to come to the holy mountain of the Lord. Yet when we hear in today's gospel what on the face of it appear to be some harsh and uncharacteristically unwelcoming words spoken by Jesus to this distressed and frightened woman, we can perhaps be forgiven for asking what is going on, and what are we to make of these words of Jesus when set against that Isaiahan imagery?

Perhaps the first thing to ask is: are they Jesus' own words? It's a good question, and the difficult answer is probably yes they are Jesus' words. Scholars believe so because it would have been extremely unlikely that the evangelist would have made up such a saying. We know that anything controversial in the gospel is most probably going to trace its source from and therefore a pathway back to Jesus, since any attempt to soften such words would simply damage the message however harsh the words might seem. So when Jesus is approached by this woman, just what is the impact of his words when set alongside the vision which Isaiah is depicting, since they hardly seem to chime with what Isaiah is expressing?

Before saying anything else it is most important that to appreciate what is happening, we avoid any notion that Jesus was being exclusive or sectarian. Jesus knew well enough the distress that many of his fellow Jews suffered from being ostracised by their communities as a result of what was regarded by the Law as being "unclean". Indeed in the passages of Matthew's gospel just preceding this one, we encounter Jesus having a very vociferous debate with the Pharisees about the Law, and the interpretation of what it meant and stood for. Furthermore we know that Jesus often went out on a limb to show how the Law particularly in relation to its application on the Sabbath was being used to justify actions which essentially sidestepped the basic human values of compassion and kindness. But this woman was a gentile and not a Jew, and therefore she was not subject to the Law. So, was Jesus telling her that because she was a gentile she could have no place in the temple, no place at the table, no place in Isaiah's amazing vision? I hardly think so. What Jesus himself seems to have encountered, was the active coming to reality of Isaiah's vision and revealingly in the conversation he had with this Gentile woman, he may even have come to appreciate more fully the immediacy and magnificence of its expression.

We should not therefore be surprised to find Jesus open and willing to learn and change his mind; after all he was human, taught by his parents and family. This gospel written in times of turbulence and struggle for the fledgling Christian community, a time when it was just beginning to look out beyond the confines of its own horizons, to test the waters of the gentile world it was to inhabit, and Matthew recalling this incident saw it as a great image of openness and acceptance. By the time that John penned his gospel some twenty to thirty years after Matthew, such was the expansion of the faith that John remembered another saying of Jesus and was courageous enough to include it:

And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and these I have to lead as well. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock and one shepherd

We still have much to learn.