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Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:13-32; Matthew 15: 10-28

As many of you know I've been moving house lately, so all my books have been languishing in boxes – but one of my favourites, which emerged into the light of day this week is E M Foster's great work "A passage to India". The novel is set in British India in the 1920's. It's a rigid time of racial divisions where British social life centres on "the Club" where Indians are not admitted – except as servants, of course.

But the Chief Magistrate, Mr Turton, decides to please some visitors by holding a Bridge Party – not the game, but to bridge the gap between East and West by inviting the more important and educated Indians to a party on the Club lawn. This passage begins after some Indian lawyers (known as pleaders) have been invited and are deciding whether or not to accept.

> "They had been speaking in the little room near the Courts where the pleaders waited for clients; clients, waiting for pleaders, sat in the dust outside. These had not received a card from Mr Turton. And there were circles even beyond these – people who wore nothing but a loincloth, people who wore not even that, and spent their lives in knocking two sticks together before a scarlet doll – humanity grading and drifting beyond the educated vision, until no earthly invitation can embrace it.
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> All invitations must proceed from heaven perhaps; perhaps it is futile for men to initiate their own unity, they do but widen the gulfs between them by the attempt. So at all events thought old Mr Graysford and young Mr Sorley, the devoted missionaries who lived out beyond the slaughter-houses, always travelled third on the railways, and never came up to the club. In our father's house are many mansions, they taught, and there alone will the incompatible multitudes of mankind be welcomed and soothed. No one shall be turned away by the servants on that verandah, be he black or white, not one shall be kept standing who approaches with a loving heart. And why should the divine hospitality cease here? Consider, with all reverence, the monkeys. May there not be a mansion for the monkeys also? Old Mr Graysford said No, but young Mr Sorley, who was advanced, said Yes; he saw no reason why monkeys should not have their collateral share of bliss, and he had sympathetic discussions about them with his Hindu friends. And the jackals? Jackals were indeed less to Mr Sorley's mind, but he admitted that the mercy of God, being infinite, may well

> embrace all mammals. And the wasps? He became uneasy during the descent to wasps, and was apt to change the conversation. And oranges, cactuses, crystals and mud? and the bacteria inside Mr Sorley? No, no, this is going too far. We must exclude someone from our gathering or we shall be left with nothing." [*A Passage to India,* pp.37-38]

The desire to keep others out – "keep out the rabble" – is one of the commonest and least admirable human qualities. We do it all the time.

Listen to kids in a playground: "You can't come to my party". We make the word "Exclusive" a term of praise. How often do you get sent "exclusive" offers? – offers to buy something whose only value is how many other people can't have it.

Our country is an example to the world of the benefits of decades of relatively open immigration – with the human and economic enrichment it brings – but still our politicians on both sides win cheap votes by playing the exclusion card. How tough they are at keeping the rest out.

All this expresses a theology, an image of God – *the God of limited grace*. On this view there is only so much grace, so much love, so much goodness to go around. We need to hang on to what we've got and keep others out, so they can't steal it from us. We shouldn't be surprised that Foster's next chapter begins: "The Bridge Party was not a success".

In the Gospel, Jesus is challenged to hold his own Bridge Party when a pagan woman asks for his help. As a Jew, a male, a Rabbi, he represents a thousand years of exclusion, separation between Jews and Gentiles. When Matthew calls her a "Canaanite" woman the verse recalls that, in the time of Joshua, Canaan was the "Promised Land", and the Canaanites were those who lived there and had to be pushed aside for the Israelites to make it their home.

Israel's need to keep itself separate from Canaanites and other foreigners, and from their foreign gods, is deeply stamped in its history and psyche. There are many Old Testament texts which prove that only trouble ever comes by dealing with foreigners.

But although that's the dominant Jewish position, it's not the whole story, and there are other Old Testament texts which show the opposite. Like the book of Ruth which shows the faith of a foreigner, Ruth a Moabite woman, and how she and her faith are used by God. They become part of God's plan as through her marriage to an Israelite she turns out to be the great-grandmother of King David.

Or like the second half of the Book of Isaiah, chapters 40 to 66, which show that God has indeed chosen Israel out of all the nations, but not for separation: it is in order to bring salvation and the knowledge of God to nations that do not know him, to be a "light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth"

So now the woman's cry for help challenges Jesus: as a representative of Israel where does he stand? Is he an excluder or an includer? His response makes us uncomfortable. We'd like him to say "Come in, sit down, how can I help?" but he seems first to ignore her then he says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel" and finally when she presses him – kneeling before him, saying "Lord help me" – he says "It is not fair to take the childrens' food and throw it to the dogs".

How easily the language of exclusion and religious vilification trips off the tongue. But does he mean it?

Isn't he throwing the challenge back at her, saying "This is who you are, this is what I am; everyone knows that Jews have no dealings with Gentiles – how then would you bridge this divide?"

And she does so, with a level of imagination and humour which Jesus takes to be a sign of faith. She picks up his reference to a house, or household, as well as his words about children and dogs, and she says, in effect, "A household has many members at different levels – adults and children, and servants and dogs licking the scraps. All belong in their own way, and all are fed". So, she says, it's better to be a dog in God's household, where life is, than t be a free person outside.

Remember the words of Psalm 84:
"I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness".

Jesus' words are a test of the reality of her appeal: what is she willing to put up with and to give up, in order to get the thing she needs, God's healing grace? She shows she is not espousing a victim mentality, or demanding her rights, but genuinely, urgently, seeking help, strong in the conviction that the God of Israel desires to help even Gentiles and to draw them also into his household. For this great faith in the God of unlimited grace – the God who bursts boundaries – she receives high praise and far more than crumbs – she receives the answer to her prayers, the healing of her daughter.

It's plain that God's care and desire is not only for the lost sheep of Israel but also for the wild goats of Canaan, and we show ourselves like God

when we open ourselves especially to the other, the stranger, the difficult to love – and even to those we do love, but could love more and better.

The Catholic spiritual writer Henri Nouwen says: "To pray for others means to offer others an hospitable place where I can really listen to their needs and concerns". Living the gospel means creating such an hospitable place in prayer and care for others, wherever they are – not because we're nice people, or we'd like to be, but because we align ourselves with God, who desires to call everyone into his embrace beyond all barriers.

This is what St Paul discovered on the Road to Damascus. He had been a zealous believer in the *God-of-limited-grace*, God-for-Israel-only, so he went about persecuting Christians – but then he encountered the risen Christ, the light for the nations, the revelation of God as *God-for-all-the-world*. He was converted, not to a new religion, or a new God, but to a new understanding of the God of Israel. In the light of Christ he realised he had got God all wrong, and it became his life's mission to carry that light to the ends of the earth.

The battle between these two images of Israel's God dominated his ministry. While many Christians received with joy the good news of salvation for all in Christ, nearly all the Jews rejected it, clinging as he had himself to the image of God-for-Israel-only. Pharisees refused to recognise gentile Christians as equal to Jews, and even some Christians thought gentile Christians were second best and hesitated to meet or eat with them [see Galatians 2: 11-14].

In the reading from Romans 11 we hear Paul, towards the end of his life, puzzling over what God's plan can be in all this. The Christian project all seemed so easy when he started:
1. God sends the Messiah,
2. Israel accepts the Messiah and proclaims him to the world,
3. the world accepts the Messiah and God's kingdom comes.

But now Israel has largely rejected the Messiah and it's all gone wrong. But he's sure that God has a plan and the end of it all will be salvation for Jews (for "the gift and the calling of God are irrevocable") and salvation for Gentiles also (for God's grace is endless).

Certainly there is a testing as Jesus tested the Canaanite woman. Were the gentiles ready for God's grace? is this what they really want? But the testing is part of the grace, not the denial of it. How God will do this is a mystery – Paul cries out: "How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways" (v. 33)! But he is clear that whatever happens on

the way God's purpose is to be merciful to all: "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (v. 32)

Will God bring everyone to salvation? That's a fine vision and hope, and it's one Paul and his followers develop elsewhere: Eph 1:10 speaks of God's "plan for the fullness of time, to gather up *all things* in Christ, the things in heaven and the things on earth"

The scope of that vision is breathtaking – God's plan to gather up everything in his kingdom – and Christians have not usually believed it. E.M. Forster had to travel to India to discover it – in the vastness of Hinduism – which he contrasted in his book with what he called "poor little talkative Christianity".

The big vision is there in the New Testament and it's there in the early theologians – Iranaeus, Origen – but it all became difficult and from St Augustine onwards, Christians became obsessed with judgement and predestination, and how many people would *not* get into heaven. The list got longer and longer, pagans and Jews, obviously and unrepentant sinners, and unbaptised infants, and Catholics OR Protestants - depending on which side you're on – and in all this there was no time to spare for the *everything*, the monkeys and jackals and wasps.

We have tied ourselves again to the *God of limited grace*, the false image of God exploded by Jesus, the god of exclusion and hanging on to what little we've got. We've done it so well that the world now thinks of Christians as hard, judgemental people always ready with a book of rules to throw at others in the name of this scowling, defensive deity.

If that is not the god we believe in and find in Jesus, if we believe God passionately desires to draw all into his loving embrace (even us, for heaven's sake) how will we show this, in what we say and do, and how we deal with others? How will it alter our politics and our prayer life? How will we, as a community, be that bridge, that hospitable place where others can know the unconditional and overflowing love of God?