

16 August 2026 11th Sunday after Trinity
Isaiah 56: 1 & 6-8 Romans 11.1-2a, 29-32 Matthew 15: 21-28
Eucharist. St James Church

Test Match

This coming week, for those with a certain interest, one of the most important and profound decisions of the summer will be made: **who will make up the England team for the Test Match series against Pakistan**, starting on Wednesday.

Who's going to bat at number three? Who's going to take on the all-rounder's role? Selection for a Test side often comes down to the last moment — who's in and who's out is debated endlessly until the captain finally announces it.

I realise I may be in a minority in placing such gravitas on this particular situation. But the cricketing question of *who's in and who's out* is actually a microcosm of a much larger issue — one that is very prevalent today, and certainly not new. It is a question that goes right back to the beginnings of the human story.

And it is a question that runs straight through the Scriptures.

Isaiah

These chapters of Isaiah were written at a crucial moment in the history of God's people. The exiles had returned from Babylon. Jerusalem and the surrounding towns were being rebuilt. What remained of their former land was fragile, fractured, and uncertain.

There was little stable leadership. There were tensions within the community; questions about justice, worship, and inclusion. Food security was precarious. It was, in every sense, a **cost-of-living crisis**, a **social crisis**, and a **security crisis**.

The land was now known as *Yehud* — the name from which "Judea" later comes. And within Yehud there were conflicts between different groups of returning exiles: those who had been

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deported to Babylon, and those who had fled or been scattered elsewhere after Jerusalem's destruction. These groups were trying to rebuild a shared life, but they did not always agree on worship, identity, or who truly belonged.

Into this fragile situation, Isaiah speaks a vision of the society God desires — a community centred on Sabbath, worship, justice, and faithfulness. God places himself at the centre of the community, but the community itself is now **open** in ways it had not been before.

Isaiah records God saying:

“Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel: I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”

Here is the hint — the whisper — that God's vision is wider than the traditional boundaries of the chosen people.

Isaiah goes on, in his poetic and prophetic way, to lay the groundwork for someone who will come and open up a relationship with God that surpasses anything previously known through the law. Understandably, this was incomprehensible for many Judeans — even offensive. And this sets the background for the deeply challenging moment Matthew recalls from Jesus' ministry.

Matthew

When Matthew wrote his Gospel, sometime after AD 70, the communities he served were wrestling with a serious question: **should followers of Jesus remain entirely within the Jewish people, or should the faith be opened fully to the Gentiles?**

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Elsewhere in the early Church, Gentile believers were already swelling the numbers. The question of inclusion — who's in and who's out — was not theoretical. It was urgent.

Matthew remembers a moment when **even Jesus** appears to face this tension. His ministry had been carried out almost entirely within the borders of Israel — perhaps because that was simply where his opportunities lay. But as Matthew's community looked back, with the question of inclusion pressing upon them, they remembered this particular incident with sharp clarity.

The woman who approaches Jesus is a Gentile — a descendant of Israel's ancient enemies, living beyond Israel's borders, with no claim on the covenant promises. In the worldview of Jesus' contemporaries, she is **outside the circle**. Her plea confronts Jesus with a real dilemma: *is God's mercy only for Israel, or is it for all?* Her presence forces the question that Isaiah hinted at and Matthew's community later wrestled with.

Also Jesus saw his ministry as the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel. His teaching, healing, and proclamation of the kingdom were directed first to "the lost sheep of the house of *Israel*." Her witty response showed Jesus something that, perhaps, revealed to him that the message was now ready to be heard and received by those *outside* the house.

God's salvation was always meant for the whole world, but it begins with Israel and then flows outward. Jesus initially hesitant, even some might say, rude, becomes faithful to that pattern. I think it's extraordinary that the early church kept this story as part of the gospel. Some say that he was being flippant and comedic, but the majority of scholars think that this *is* as sharp as it sounds. I wonder what you think?

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Her faith turns a boundary into a doorway, and Jesus steps into Isaiah's wider vision of God who gathers not only Israel but "others besides those already gathered."

St Paul

No one else in the New Testament face the challenge of dealing with who's in and who's out more than Saint Paul - it occupies the subject of many of his letters.

Paul lived right at the fault-line where the early Church was trying to work out who belonged: Jews who followed Jesus, Jews who didn't, Gentiles who were flooding into the churches, and Gentiles who still lived by pagan customs. Every community he planted had to wrestle with questions of identity, belonging, tradition, boundaries, roles. His letters are full of debates about circumcision, food laws, worship practices, and the place of Israel in God's plan — all of them dealing with the same issue: just how wide is the circle of God's people, and on what basis does anyone belong?

Paul's response to these tensions is remarkable. Instead of drawing hard lines, he goes back to the deepest truth of the gospel: everyone stands in need of mercy, and everyone is invited into it. In Romans He insists that God's promises to Israel are *irrevocable*, yet he also celebrates the astonishing mercy shown to the Gentiles. And then he does something extraordinary: he shows how God uses each group to bless the other. Ancient Israel's stumbling opened the door for Gentiles to receive mercy; now the Gentiles' faithfulness will help them rediscover that same mercy. For Paul, the question of "who's in and who's out" is answered not by putting up obstacles but by opening doors to all who want to come in.

Today

Scripture shows us that the question of who's in and who's out has always been one of the most challenging and emotive issues human beings face – and that's without cricket! Isaiah wrestled with it as returning exiles tried to rebuild a fractured society. Jesus faced it when a woman from outside Israel asked him for mercy. Paul lived at the crossroads of communities trying to work out how Jews and Gentiles could belong together in Christ.

We still face these questions today. Not just in one area of public debate, but in many. Questions about belonging, identity, welcome, boundaries, and responsibility run through almost every discussion in our national life. They are complex, sensitive, and rarely solved by slogans or quick, glib answers.

But Scripture gives us a way of seeing. Isaiah's vision of God gathering "others besides those already gathered." Jesus' response to the faith of an outsider. St Paul insisting that God's mercy is wide enough to hold all people together.

The idea is clear: God's desire is to draw the whole world into the renewal of creation and into covenant relationship with him — not by ignoring complexity, but by extending mercy and calling people into a transformed life centred on Christ.

This is why, in the Church of England, we say that everyone in the parish belongs to the parish church. You don't have to believe certain things, or be a particular kind of person, or cross some invisible threshold. We are here for everyone — to offer welcome, prayer, support, and the mercy of God in whatever way people are able to receive it. That's part of how we try to model Christ-centred inclusion in our own community.

And so this is our calling: to model Christ-centred inclusion. A community shaped by grace rather than fear; a community where

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belonging is meaningful and discipleship is deep; a community where everyone — even the unlikeliest — is welcomed.

So may Christ widen our hearts as he widens his circle, until all find their place in his mercy

Amen

Rev'd Richard Haynes 11th Sunday after Trinity