

Twentieth Sunday of the Year August 20, 2017

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 Matthew 15:21-28

Following Jesus means that we ought to leave our comfort zone and accept God's ways of thinking and acting. He calls everyone to be with him, be close to him and respond to him. Yet his ways are different and purposeful. Looking into the world around us we are baffled and shaken by conflicts that spring from religious intolerance. There are the attacks on groups of other religions, hate filled writings published, continual hatred and mistrust is shown. Even though there is a desire by a few for unity and togetherness, there are more forces that take people in opposite direction. Today's three readings show God's plan as revealing and unfolding a more generous love that stretches to people inviting them to follow him. This reveals generously a world where the Kingdom of God exists and is big enough to welcome everyone. Wherever hatred and narrow-mindedness and prejudice come from, surely they are not from God. But they have to wait in patience to recognize the divine message and his working which finally leads to a response. In the Gospel of today we have the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman and Jesus praises the faith of the pagan woman and cures her daughter. We are presented with his apparent hesitation to heal her daughter until her persistence demonstrates her great faith. In the first reading the prophet describes a new age. All the nations will gather together in God's house of prayer, which is a holy place. Paul in the second reading rejoices in his ministry to the gentiles. He trusts that the conversion of the gentiles will prompt the Jews to conversion and he looks forward to the day when the Jews will embrace the saving mercy of God.

In the First Reading of today, Prophet Isaiah speaks on behalf of God that the house of the Lord shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. This refers to the second Temple constructed after the return of the people from exile. The exile had made them wiser, disposed to listen to the word of God; to observe what is right and do what is just. It was always justice and right rather than holocausts and sacrifices that secured their place in the Promised Land. Service to God was always a hallmark of Israel's relationship with God. That means that God's people were expected to obey the Laws of Moses and handed down from generation to generation. The Prophet tells them that God's blessings are available also to foreigners. He says: "The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants...these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their...offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." In this prophetic exhortation and warning, the Lord promises to bring to His holy mountain all the foreigners, the gentiles, who are willing to unite themselves to Him. This refers to universal salvation, the necessity for purification and the fulfillment of hopes through the arrival of the promised Messiah. If they keep the Sabbath, all people are welcome in the house of the Lord and their sacrifices will be acceptable on the altar of the Lord. These are the ones that God promised to recognize as His children, bringing them in His House of Prayer.

Though specially known as the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul never forgot his own people. His hope is that, when Jews see what God does for the gentiles and how they benefit from his

mercy, they will accept Jesus and come to salvation. In today's Second Reading Paul tells the Romans that both Jews and gentiles have failed to obey God's will, but God's gift and calling to Israel was irrevocable. For God had foreseen in His election of Israel as His people that in time, they would harden their hearts and reject the truth. While Paul expressed sorrow over Israel's blindness, he is quick to point out that God can make good things come out of everything. Because Israel rejected the opportunity placed before it, the salvific uprightness that was made possible through Jesus the opportunity to believe in Christ was offered to all. When a reference is made to all, this includes Israel, its inclusion being an assurance that its people would not deny having been provided with the opportunity to hear the Gospel. Paul points out to those who are gathered around him, if Israel's rejection resulted in the reconciliation of the world, how much more would be the result of Israel's acceptance of the Messiah. Surely, it would be a greater glory, the dead obtaining eternal life through Christ because of the bountiful and unrestricted mercy of God. He tells them that God's word shall not return to Him empty, but it shall accomplish that which He purposed and succeed in the thing for which He sent it. Speaking of God's Divine mercy, Paul indicated that since God had shown mercy to His people that had disobeyed Him, in all fairness, this same Divine mercy should be shown towards the Gentiles.

Today's Reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the account of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, is one of the rare encounters of Jesus with gentiles. When Jesus went to the district of Tyre and Sidon in Southern Phoenicia, he was approached by a woman who abounded in love for her daughter who was tormented by a demon. Most likely she would have heard of the great miracles that Jesus was performing towards the Jewish people, this Canaanite woman took it upon herself to personally locate Jesus and asks him to have pity on her. She tells him that she has a daughter tormented by a demon. What is unusual about this event is that the woman was a Canaanite. In the Old Testament understanding the Canaanites were viewed as a very sinful race that embodied every possible evil and godlessness and were seen as a nation that was to be exterminated. As it was not the general practice for the Jewish people to mix with the Samaritans, so also it was not the general practice for them to mix with the Canaanites. Here we have a unique situation where Jesus is approached by a race that was avoided by the Jewish people. Also surprising is not that she obviously wants Jesus to heal her daughter, but she refers to him as Lord and the Son of David, which are faith affirmations indicating that she believes Jesus is the Messiah. Her faith is expressed in the titles she gives Jesus: 'Lord' and 'Son of David', the messianic titles. They indicate that she sees in Jesus someone above the ordinary, someone very special. She seems to know who Jesus is and believes that he can help her daughter. We are not told how a Canaanite woman came to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. The disciples however treat the woman as an intrusion and a bother.

The Gospel narrative tells us that at first, Jesus ignored her. He did not show any response to her request. The more Jesus ignored her, the more the woman shouted, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me." When the woman was shouting repeatedly the disciples of Jesus were getting annoyed and urged Jesus to send her away so that she would go away and they would have their peace. In this particular case, when the disciples were urging Jesus to dismiss the woman, this was not a request to just get rid of her. They trusted their master's capacity to heal

people. Based on the exact meaning of the original writing of this passage of the Holy Scripture, their request was for Jesus to dismiss the woman by granting her petition. Jesus does not at this point directly address the woman but utters in the hearing of the disciples that his mission was only to Judaism. He tells them that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Even though the Gospels written at a later date make preaching to the gentile Christian community as part of Jesus' mission, we see here the narrow attitude shown by the Lord. When he sent his disciples two by two on a mission to proclaim the kingdom, he told them to go only to the lost sheep of Israel and not to others. Here Jesus seems totally uninterested in dealing with this woman or her request. How harsh these words must have sounded to the woman. It was like saying to her, "God's mercy is only for my people, the Palestinians. You are a Canaanite; go away!"

However, the woman has other ideas. She is not about to take no for an answer. Anyway, the determined lady knew a good thing when she saw it and she was not about to give up on Jesus. She threw herself at His feet and repeated the words, "Lord, help me." What is important is that her prayer expresses both helplessness and faith. Even when Jesus responds sharply that it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs, a slang used to indicate the gentiles. The gentiles, in the eyes of the Jews were total outsiders and unclean and were considered no better than dogs. But she responds with an answer that catches Jesus off guard. She tells him that even though dogs do not get children's food, they will surely eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. Seeing how great her faith and her remarkable perseverance, Jesus tells her, "Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." We are told that her daughter was healed instantly. Here Jesus does not attempt a comeback. This pagan woman has got the best of him and she did it on his terms, namely the terms of faith. Jesus fully recognizes the powerful faith of the woman and that faith overcomes any reservations he might have had and grants the woman's request. Some people find this story embarrassing because they think it places Jesus in a bad light. Such an approach misses the point of the story. The story in fact is about the power of faith regardless of who exercises it.

Reflecting on the miracle we understand that Jesus' reason for not listening to her is that he was sent only to the house of Israel and not to others. He seems to be saying that, since she is an outsider, her problem is of no concern to him. In fact, Jesus' mission and work was almost entirely centered on his own people and it was left to his disciples to go out to the world and preach. We know from the Acts of the Apostles, they did not realize that at first. It took some special experiences before they realized that the gentiles could also be filled with the Spirit of God and were being called to be followers of Jesus. Matthew stresses the key issue of today's Gospel namely the place of the gentiles in a Christian community that originally considered itself exclusively for Jewish people. In the early church there was the growing tension between those born of Jewish origin and those gentiles who joined the group. They aimed to move out of the exclusiveness to the inclusive situation where everyone is welcome into the Kingdom of God. This takes great faith as it happened with the Canaanite woman. In the miracle of today Jesus responds to the manifestation of great faith and her daughter is healed. For Matthew this is a story about faith and the power of faith to transcend those things that divide us.

Finally, the Canaanite woman teaches us the need to persevere in our prayers. We must realize that when we ask God for something it does not always result in getting what we have asked for. It helps us to see more clearly what God wants for us and what the best is really for us. What we need most is not the carrying out of our own wishes but having the peace and security that can only come from our being in total harmony with God's will for us, so that his will and mine are identical. Here is the woman who asked much from Jesus and ultimately her prayers are answered. She had her love and faith in Jesus and she loved her daughter too. She is rewarded for her faith and perseverance in her prayers. At the same time today's Gospel is an affirmation that God's love and mercy are extended to all who call on him in faith and trust, no matter whom they are or where they are. We had the words of Prophet Isaiah that the foreigners who have attached themselves to the Lord and have loved his name and held on to his covenant, the Lord will bring them to the holy mountain. He will make them joyful in his house of prayer. His Kingdom that is on earth now and that is to come was not meant for only one people; it was meant for all the nations. Each of us has a role to play in making God's kingdom come. Every time we reach out with understanding and compassion to neighbor who may be of different faith, every time we pray for peace among nations and religions, every time we stand up for those who are persecuted for their beliefs, we help to reverse the tide of religious discrimination and prejudice and enable to rebuild the kingdom. As we continue our worship and as we are about to share in the Eucharistic banquet with our brothers and sisters, we pray the Lord that we may reach out to all and make our place the house of faith and the house of prayer.

The train has started moving. It is packed with people of all ages, mostly with the working men and women and young college guys and gals. Near the window an old man and his 30 year old son were sitting. As the train moves by, the son is overwhelmed with joy as he was thrilled with the scenery outside. "See dad, the scenery of green trees moving away is very beautiful" This behavior from a thirty year old son made the other people feel strange about him. Everyone started murmuring something or other about this son. "This guy seems to be a mad person," a newly married person whispered to his wife. Suddenly it started raining. Rain drops fell on the travelers through the opened window. The Thirty year old son, filled with joy, said: "See dad, how beautiful the rain is." The young lady there got irritated with the rain drops spoiling her new suit. The young man shouted: "can't you see it's raining, you old man, if your son is not feeling well get him soon to a mental asylum. And don't disturb public henceforth." The old man hesitated first and then in a low tone replied "we are on the way back from hospital, my son got discharged today morning. He was a blind by birth, last week only he got his vision. These rain and nature are new to his eyes. Please forgive us for the inconvenience caused..." The things we see may be right from our perspective until we know the truth. But when we know the truth our reaction to that will hurt even us. So try to understand the problem better before taking a harsh action.

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