

20th Sunday of the Year A

First Reading Isaiah 56:1.6-7

Thus says the Lord: Have a care for justice, act with integrity, for soon my salvation will come and my integrity be manifest. Foreigners who have attached themselves to the Lord to serve him and to love his name and be his servants – all who observe the sabbath, not profaning it, and cling to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain. I will make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their holocausts and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.

Second Reading Romans 11:13-15.29-32

Let me tell you pagans this: I have been sent to the pagans as their apostle, and I am proud of being sent, but the purpose of it is to make my own people envious of you, and in this way save some of them. Since their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, do you know what their admission will mean? Nothing less than a resurrection from the dead! God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice. Just as you changed from being disobedient to God, and now enjoy mercy because of their disobedience, so those who are disobedient now – and only because of the mercy shown to you – will also enjoy mercy eventually. God has imprisoned all men in their own disobedience only to show mercy to all mankind.

Gospel Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left Gennesaret and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting, "Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil." But he answered her not a word. And his disciples went and pleaded with him. "Give her what she wants," they said, "because she is shouting after us." He said in reply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." But the woman had come up and was kneeling at his feet. "Lord," she said, "help me." He replied, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs." She retorted, "Ah yes, sir; but even house-dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, you have great faith.

Let your wish be granted." And from that moment her daughter was well again.

Meditation

Jesus withdraws to the Gentile districts of Tyre and Sidon to get away from the adversaries who taunt him for breaking the Jewish rituals of purification. Here he will redefine the limits of clean and unclean. Through the supplication of a Canaanite woman, he will deal with the question of salvation for the Gentiles. Strangely enough, Jesus remains silent as if he shared the arrogant particularism of the Jews toward these "dogs of the Gentiles". He seems to hesitate and when he decides to answer the woman, he does so in shocking terms. He wishes to do the will of God who desires that the lost sheep of Israel be gathered together. Only then, from the base of this renewed people, will he welcome the Gentiles, in accordance with their belief into the great family of Abraham. What is this woman's problem? She does not believe that she has any right to demand the bread of divine friendship reserved primarily for the Jews. All she can ask for are crumbs. But she asks with such faith and humility that she will receive the fullness of salvation for which she hopes. In the welcome Jesus gives this foreigner, the Christians of the first century saw a prophetic model for their own attitude toward the Gentile believers. They had to go beyond the limits of an elitist religion, one based on race alone, in order to preach a universal salvation grounded in faith.

Can we transcend the frontiers of our prejudices? Many whom we consider alien in fact teach us the meaning of faith.