

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 56:1, 6-7
<i>Response</i>	O God, let all the nations praise you!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 11:13-15, 29-32
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom and cured every disease among the people.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 15:21-28

The 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us further into Matthew's Gospel with the account of Jesus' mysterious encounter with the Canaanite woman. This is a pretty well-known story, but Matthew's version in particular is difficult, because in it Jesus says some things that sound offensive to our ears and probably would have sounded offensive in the first century A.D. So let's look at his exchange with this woman. We will read the Gospel and will try to take some time to put it in its first century cultural and Jewish context, and then we will also go back and look at the Old Testament and how it is anticipating what Jesus is doing in this episode. So the Gospel reading is from Matthew 15:21-8, and this is what it says:

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters'

table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.¹

Okay, so what's going on here? Let's walk through it and make a few points and put it in context. Number one, notice where Jesus is, the geography matters here. He is in the district of Tyre and Sidon. These were Gentile territories that were to the north of what we consider the holy land today, in the realm known as Phoenicia. So they're predominantly Gentile, and it is in that geographical area that a Gentile woman, a Canaanite woman, comes to him and asks him to deliver her daughter from demonic possession — which is something that was very frequent, especially in the pagan territories. Now what does it mean to call her a Canaanite woman? Well if you recall, if you go back to the Old Testament book of Genesis, chapter 10, verse 15, it actually says that Sidon — that name Sidon which became a name for the territory — was a firstborn son, the firstborn son of Canaan, who was the great ancestor, in the book of Genesis, of many of the enemies of Israel, chief among them the Canaanites, the people who lived in the land of Canaan in the holy land before the Israelites came in and conquered them and dwelt in the land at the time of Joshua and Judges. So this woman isn't just a Gentile. She isn't even just a pagan. She belongs to the Canaanites, which of all the pagan peoples, were the most immersed not just in idolatry, but in immorality, and had a history for being the enemies of Israel. They were at war constantly with Israel in the Old Testament. If you want an example of the way in which the Canaanites as a people symbolized wickedness to the people of Israel, you can read the book of Wisdom 12. It just goes through all the various sins and immoralities that were practiced by the Canaanites, especially at the time of Joshua and Judges. Not only did they worship false gods, but they sacrificed their children to demons. It was bad. So the Canaanites were almost this living symbol of a wicked people to the people of Israel.

And yet this woman, who is a Gentile and is a Canaanite, comes up to Jesus and says "have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." Now what is interesting about that approach? This shows you first and foremost, this is no ordinary Canaanite, right!?

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

She's coming to Jesus and begging him for mercy, and using the title, the royal title, "Son of David" when she is addressing him. Honoring him, in a sense, as King, as Messiah, as the ruler of the people of Israel — which is a lot more than Jesus got from some of his contemporaries living in the holy land. Many of them rejected him, but this Canaanite woman recognizes him. Also, I might just note here, that the expression "have mercy on me, Lord" — *eleēson me, kyrie* in the Greek — is where we get *Kyrie Eleison* from in the Mass. When we say *Kyrie Eleison*, that expression — although most people think it is Latin — is actually Greek and it is from the New Testament. So this is a plea for mercy. Now how does Jesus respond to this extraordinary plea and this honor that the woman gives him? He ignores her, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't answer her a word. Now that is very mysterious, and frankly, kind of rude, right!? I mean it comes off as if he is being rude to her. If someone came up to you and gave you a title of honor and begged you for mercy, would you not say anything? What is Jesus up to here?

Now. Notice though, on the other hand, Jesus doesn't send her away. The disciples, when they encounter her, say "Lord, please send her away, she's crying after us." In other words, "she is annoying." They are getting aggravated by her. They are probably, frankly, a little uncomfortable with her, given the fact that she is obviously a Gentile and a Canaanite and she's coming and supplicating Jesus for mercy. Jesus, notice, on the one hand he ignores her, which appears to be rude, it appears to be dismissive, on the other hand he doesn't send her away, he just sits there silent. And then when the Apostles ask him to send her away, he responds with a mysterious saying. He says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Now what does that mean? Well if you look at that in context, this has to do with the fact that as the Messiah, Jesus is sent on his mission during his earthly life, during his public ministry, he is sent first and foremost, and only, as he says here, to the house of Israel. So although Jesus would go into foreign territories, and on occasion he does encounter non-Israelites, like the Gerasene demoniac, who was clearly a pagan, his mission, the people he goes to, the people he seeks after, are what he calls "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Now I could go into so much about this, I did a whole dissertation on this whole question of the 10 lost tribes of Israel and of the descendants of the northern kingdom, which were called Israelites, who had been exiled and scattered since the

time of Assyria, in the eighth century B.C. Around 722 B.C., the northern 10 tribes of Israel were forcibly deported by the Assyrians, they were scattered among the nations, and then the Assyrians settled Gentile peoples in the northern kingdom — those are the ancestors of the Samaritans. So there was an expectation in Judaism at the time of Jesus, that one day the 10 lost tribes of Israel would be gathered back into the promised land, they would be brought back into the promised land at the time of the Messiah, and that one of the jobs of the Messiah would be to gather the lost tribes of Israel, so that all 12 tribes would be reunited under one king, and then the kingdom of God would be established on earth. So when Jesus says “I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” we have to be clear here. Most of us think he means “I was sent only to the Jews and not to the Gentiles,” and that's partially correct. But what he really means is, “although I'm in Gentile territory, in the northern territories, Galilee, Tyre, Sidon, my mission is to gather the lost tribes of Israel. My mission is to gather the scattered sheep, the remnant so to speak, of those northern Israelites, of which there were some still living in his day, like Anna of the tribe of Asher. She was a prophetess down in the Temple. She's not technically speaking a Jew. In other words, she's not descended from the southern tribes of Judah, she's a Northerner, she's an Israelite from one of the tribes of Israel.

So Jesus uses this image of the scattered sheep of Israel to describe his mission, and we will see this elsewhere in the New Testament. If you read all the way to the end of the Gospel of Matthew, after the resurrection Jesus is going to tell the Apostles “now go to all nations...preach the good news to all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” That is the great commission. But he doesn't send them to the Gentiles until after the resurrection, because there is an order to salvation history. As St. Paul says in the letter to the Romans 1:16, “to the Jew first and then to the Greek.” In other words, God's message of salvation is first given to his chosen people and then through them it goes out to all the nations of the world, after the resurrection. So basically what Jesus is saying here is “I wasn't sent to the Gentiles during my earthly ministry.”

Now how does the woman respond? Well she could have just gone away dejected, he has already ignored her and then said he was only sent to Israelites. But instead she persists and it says “she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’” So she takes it up a notch. She kneels before him and it is interesting here, the

Greek expression is *proskyneō*. We've seen this elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew when the Apostles *proskyneō* before Jesus. But notice the English translation here is different. When the Apostles *proskyneō*, when they fall down on their knees before Jesus, the English translation is “they worshiped him.” When the Gentile woman *proskyneōs*, the English translation says that “she knelt before him.” So it is ambiguous. You could say here, you could translate it, given everything else in Matthew, that “she worshiped him” and said “Lord, help me.” Now either way, however you translate it, she clearly venerates him and begs him as Lord to help her and to help her daughter. Now what does Jesus say to that? He still resists and says “it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

Now in ancient times as well as today, this would be an insult. To compare someone to a dog would be an insult. You can see this elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, in Philippians 3:2, Paul is talking about his opponents and he says “beware of the dogs.” These were the ones who were insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation. In the book of Revelation 22:15, it says that “outside the heavenly Jerusalem are the dogs.” It's a way of referring to people who were sinners, who were unclean. And in this context, what Jesus is doing is giving a kind of parable in which the children represent the Israelites and the dogs represent the unclean Gentiles. So what Jesus is saying here is “it's not right to take the food of the children, namely the Israelites, and feed it to the dogs, namely the Gentiles. And if you think about this, if you have a dog in your house you know what this means. You don't take the food off the table — hopefully you don't — and give it to the the family pet instead of feeding your children. There is and order even within the family. Children eat first and then the dogs would eat the scraps that were left over, that was customary in ancient Israel. If you had any scraps leftover, well then you give it to the dogs. So Jesus is saying this is out of order. You don't take the children's food and give it to the dogs. You don't take the salvation that is supposed to come to Israel first and give it first to the Gentiles.

So how does the woman respond? Again she persists, she is not going anywhere until she gets some healing for her daughter. So she flips it around and says to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” And that's the breaking point. “Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed

instantly.” At that moment she is healed. So what is going on in this story? Well let me give you a little clue here. Two things. First, let’s go back to the Old Testament. If you look at the Old Testament reading for today, you’ll see that it’s a famous prophecy from the book of Isaiah about the conversion of the Gentiles. Sometimes Christians forget this. Sometimes Christians think, “oh, well the whole idea of going to the Gentiles and the Gentiles being saved was something St. Paul came up with in the New Testament. He tried to bring the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, to the synagogues, he was rejected in the Jewish synagogues, so he decides “Okay, well now I am going to go and bring it to the Gentiles” as a kind of pragmatic measure. Nothing could be further from the truth. That’s completely wrong. Already in the Old Testament, as far back as the book of Genesis 12, where Abraham is told that all the families of the earth will be blessed through him, as far back as the Old Testament itself, we begin to see an expectation that one day in the future, at some point, the nations of the world, the families of the earth, the Gentiles, the pagans, are going to convert. They are going to begin to worship the one true God. They are going to begin to worship the God of Israel. So the reading for today, the first reading, is one of those prophecies. It is from Isaiah 56:1, 6-7, and Isaiah says this:

Thus says the LORD:

"Keep justice, and do righteousness,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

and then it skips down to verse 6:

"And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant --
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer

for all peoples.

So notice here, what is Isaiah talking about? A couple of points. Number one, in Old Testament times, Gentiles were excluded from the Temple. This is very important to note. If you go back to the book of Deuteronomy 23:1-3, it gives a list of certain people who were excluded from being in the Temple, and one of those were pagans, non-Israelites. If you weren't circumcised you could not go into the sanctuary and offer sacrifice. You certainly couldn't act as a priest. And yet, Isaiah is saying here that one day in the age of salvation, when God's salvation is revealed, at the time of the Messiah for example, foreigners are going to come into the temple and they're not just going to offer sacrifices alongside the Israelites, it actually says they're going to "minister to the Lord." Now that word minister there is the technical term for serve as priests. This would have been mind-blowing in Isaiah's day to talk about a future temple in which gentiles will not only worship God, but they will serve him as priests. How is that possible? Well he says it's going to be possible because in that future age, God is going to make his altar and his temple into a house of prayer for all peoples. Now this might be ringing a bell for you because if you recall, Jesus cites this very text when he goes in and cleanses the Temple later on in the Gospel of Matthew. He turns over the tables of the money changers and he says "my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations" or "for all people's." That's a turning point in Matthew's Gospel that, in a sense, sets in motion his passion. What does it mean? It means that Jesus, following the prophets of the Old Testament, expects that one day the Gentiles are going to convert and they will become legitimate members of God's people and they will worship him, and they will even act as priests in this mysterious new temple of the future.

With that in mind then, if you look at the Responsorial Psalm for the day, the same theme pops up. The Psalm is Psalm 67, and the refrain for the day is "O God, let all the nations praise you!" And the Psalm, like in verse two, says things like this:

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that thy way may be known upon earth,
thy saving power among all nations.

And then again it verse 5 it says:

Let the peoples praise thee, O God;
let all the peoples praise thee!

So why is that the Responsorial Psalm? Well because whenever you see the word nations in the Old Testament, the Hebrew is *gōyim* and it literally means the Gentile nations, the Gentile peoples. Even to this day, Jewish people refer to Gentiles as *gōyim*, as a *gōy*. A *gōy* means a non-Israelite, a non-Jewish person. So the book of Psalms, once again, is anticipating that one day all the nations, all the peoples of the world will praise God, even the Gentiles will come to worship the God of Israel. So those two Old Testament texts, Isaiah 56 and then Psalm 67, anticipate what is happening, in a preliminary way, in the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. In a sense, because of her persistence and because of her faith, she gets to taste in advance the salvation that is going to come to the Gentiles after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and after the great commission, where Jesus sends the Apostles to the four corners of the earth to bring the good news of salvation to all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And of course especially with the ministry of St. Paul, who called himself the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Now with that all said then, I want to close with just a little bit of an insight from the living tradition of the Church, because one of the things that I've noticed over the years when I teach this particular passage in the classroom, is that people find it disturbing. In other words, they find Jesus's treatment of the Canaanite woman somewhat off-putting. It seems like he's being unnecessarily rude, unnecessarily standoffish, and it also even seems like he is being insulting when he compares the Gentiles to dogs and the Israelites to children. So what do we make of this passage? How do we make sense of the way Jesus is treating this woman? Well in this case, I would turn to the wisdom and the writings of one of the early Church Fathers — one of my favorite and might even be my favorite ancient Christian writer — St. John Chrysostom. He lived in the fourth century A.D. He was the Archbishop of Constantinople, a very, very influential figure in the early Church. He was an eastern Church Father. And in one of his homilies, this is what he has to say. St. John Chrysostom wrote this about Jesus and the Canaanite woman. He

said that she was an example to us of patience and persistence in prayer. St. John Chrysostom wrote:

Have you understood? When the disciples entreated him the Lord put them off...

Meaning, when he asked him to send her away.

...but when the woman herself cried out begging for this favor he granted it. And, at the beginning, when she first made her request, he did not answer, but after she had come to him once, twice, and a third time, he gave her what she desired. By this he was teaching us that he had withheld the gift not to drive her away, but to make that woman's patience an example for all of us.²

So what St. John Chrysostom is telling us here is that there is a spiritual meaning to Jesus' encounter with the woman. He isn't doing this to her in order to hurt her feelings or to insult her, he is testing her faith just like he tests our faith, in order to give us an example of patience in prayer. In order to give us an example of the fact that it's important to ask other people to help us, like the woman with the disciples, but at the end the day, we need to be persistent in prayer. And if we really want the Lord to answer our prayer, we need to not pray once and then give up, we need to persist even in the face of difficulties, even in the face of the apparent silence of God. We need to entreat him, be patient in prayer, be persistent, trusting that the Lord hears us, that he knows what is best for us, and that all things will work together, in his plan of Providence, to good for those who love him.

² John Chrysostom, *Homily on Phillipians* 1:18, 12-13; trans. in E. Barnecutt, pp. 116-117