

TWENTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR A 2005

There are times in our lives when everyone has problems, needs, worries and difficulties. There are times when tragedies and crises cross our lives. In such moments, when turning to God looking for help, we sometimes have the impression that our request is not heard, that God is walking away, leaving us with our problems. How shall we explain this apparent silence of God? Is God loving only some and rejecting others or is his mercy available to all who call upon him?

Today's readings try to answer these questions by introducing us a little more deeply into the mystery of God. The first reading tells us that Israel, before going into exile and before coming into contact with other peoples, was all closed in to itself. It is only very slowly that Israel has come to detect the positive and good things of the other peoples. It was only through the work of the prophets that Israel has come to understand that their God was the Father of all peoples on earth, that whoever seeks him with a sincere heart is beloved by him.

Therefore, there should not be any more barriers between peoples: whatever their tribe, race, language or nation, they all share the same right of being members of God's people. And this is what the prophet Isaiah promises: a day will come when foreigners honoring God and observing his commandments will be escorted to the temple of the Lord. There, they will offer their sacrifices and prayers. Nobody will ever feel a stranger in the house of God. The temple will be the place of prayers for all the peoples of the earth.

This message contrasts sharply with what we see in today's Gospel when Jesus ignores the desperate cry of a mother pleading for her sick daughter. He even seems to be so harsh with her: "My concern is not with you, but only with the people of Israel. Hence these terrible words: "It would not be right for me to take something that belongs to God's chosen people, the Jews, and throw it to the dogs, to someone like you".

Is Jesus here despising pagans or those who do not belong to the people of Israel? Not at all, there should be some reason why Jesus acts this way. First of all, mind you that the people of Israel have been often not only disobedient to God and to his will, but they even rejected Jesus as the Messiah sent to redeem them. This rejection has been well underlined by St Paul in the letter to the Romans. For St Paul, Jews' disobedience has had a positive result in the sense that it has led the Christian communities to open up to the pagans. However Paul remains optimistic by saying that Jews' refusal to accept Christ will not last forever. A day will come when Israel will also bow before Jesus and acknowledge him as the Messiah announced by the prophets. Moreover, God's gifts and call being irrevocable, God delivered all to disobedience so that he may have mercy upon all. Then, on that day, when Jews will become the disciples of Jesus Christ, it will be a real resurrection from the dead.

This being said, we have to situate Jesus' mission in the context of Jews' disobedience and refusal of God's will. In this perspective, his work was directed first of all to the people of Israel so that they may turn back to God. So it was logical and fitting that he

spends his time and activity with the people of Israel. However, this does not mean he has not come for the whole world. For, even if he was harsh with the Canaanite woman, he eventually finishes by curing her daughter. As a matter of fact, by curing this girl belonging to a pagan territory, Jesus is showing that time has come to pull down all barriers dividing peoples and prejudices people have for one another. He is recognizing that God is the Father of all without limitation and, therefore, human beings have not only to appreciate each other, but also to live free from discrimination.

Another reason why Jesus said nothing to this woman seems to me that he was willing to provoke her faith. In fact, as a pagan from a tribe which was traditionally hostile to the Jews, this woman was an outsider. But being an outsider was not going to be an obstacle to her. She knew what Jesus could do for the health of her daughter. She knew he was the only person who could help her. This is why despite her background, she went to him very determined to get the healing of her daughter. Jesus' silence to her request shows that He was interested in the real issue. For him that issue was, whether or not she had faith in him. He knew that it was not right to use his resources to help people who had no faith.

In this context, the answer of the Canaanite showed him really that this woman had faith. She was not arguing with him. She was not saying that she was as good as anyone else. She acknowledged her place as an undeserving outsider. But she did have faith in Jesus and expressed it to him, kneeling at his feet. She was more than happy to get the scraps that were thrown to the hounded dogs. For her that was all she needed. For those who have faith the scraps that fall from the Lord's Table are as nourishing as the food that is served at the table. Once again, by curing the daughter of the Canaanite, Jesus shows that the pagans have more faith than the Israelites; in other words, the "dogs" are better than the "masters". This is a warning to us all who claim to be Christians and Catholics: how is our personal faith in Jesus?

Now let me finish by pointing out the importance of intercession and perseverance. We should not forget that it was at the intercession of the disciples that Jesus could talk to this woman and answer her request. This shows how we can help each other by bringing the needs of our brothers and sisters to the Lord in our prayer. We should not forget also that if this lady did not persevere in bothering Jesus, she could not get the healing of her daughter. Patience and perseverance are the fruits of faith. May God help each of us to understand that. May He increase our faith in him and his beloved Jesus Christ. God bless you all.



Homily Date: August 14, 2005
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20050814homily.pdf