

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2008

For many years, the people of Israel had conceived of salvation as something entirely reserved to them, at the exclusion of other nations. It was only after the exile in Babylon and through the repeated message of the prophets, that a new perspective started emerging in which Israel saw other peoples as inclusively destined to God's salvation

It is that universal perspective which is the main point of today's readings. The first reading of Isaiah opens with the statement that God's justice is about to be revealed and his salvation to come. But it is a salvation that God gives not only to the Jews, but to anyone of those who observe what is right and do what is just in his presence.

If righteousness and justice can be major criteria for obtaining salvation, then the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, keep his Covenant and commandments, will be received in the house of the Lord and their offerings accepted by the Lord. Then, the house of the Lord will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.

The universal perspective defended by the prophet Isaiah in this text is the main concern of Jesus in the Gospel. However, before coming to that vision, Jesus wants to make sure that those who come to him have enough faith in him. That is exactly what happens in the case of the Canaanite woman who asks for healing for her daughter.

First of all, when the woman follows Jesus and his disciples, asking for help, Jesus gives the impression of not hearing her plea. But when the disciples intervened and asked him to send the woman away, because she kept bothering them, Jesus' reaction was like that of an orthodox Jew who reminds them that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

We have to put this statement of Jesus in the context of the Jewish disobedience of God's Covenant, and even of their rejection of him. In fact, the Jewish disobedience of God's Covenant was such that it was imperious for Jesus to focus his mission first on his own people and to bring them to conversion. That was his main motivation and the guideline of his mission.

Jewish disobedience is the main focus of St Paul in the second reading to the Romans. For St Paul, Jews' disobedience was not only negative; it has also contributed to the opening to the pagans. Because of Jewish disobedience, God has shown his mercy to the Gentiles and reconciled them.

However, St Paul remains optimistic that Jews' refusal to accept Jesus will not last forever, because God's gifts and call are irrevocable. This statement teaches two things. First, the Jews have a special place in God's salvation plan. Moreover, Israel's place in salvation history is God's concern, not ours. Therefore, the Jews deserve our love, respect and gratitude. Any anti-Semitism has to be banned from any Christian. The second thing St Paul teaches us is about the danger of falling in the same trap as the Jews. What happened to the

Jews with their disobedience can happen to us today, if, as Christians, we forget our commitment before God. There is a danger of being rejected by God if we are not faithful to him. We have to take seriously this warning of St Paul.

If what St Paul says here is understandable, then Jesus' reaction in dealing with the Canaanite woman becomes clear. In fact, by reacting in the way he did in the Gospel, Jesus wanted to teach something to both the woman and the disciples. To the woman, Jesus wanted to awaken her to faith in him and to provoke her perseverance. To the disciples, Jesus wants to help them understand that God does not like the barriers they put between them and other peoples. They have to transcend, and overcome, their narrow vision that God has reserved his salvation exclusively to the Jews.

While the disciples do not know what to say any more, the woman insists that Jesus helps her. When Jesus reacts that "It is not right to take the food of the children and to throw it to the dogs", the woman perseveres and shows the depth of her faith. Because it is clear that "Even the dogs can eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters".

Wow! ... What a response! Jesus cannot believe it; he is just overcome by the faith of this strong and persevering woman. "O Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish", he says. That is how faith works; the Lord gives us according to our faith. When we give everything we can, we cannot take no for answer. The woman won the battle; her daughter was healed from that hour. The woman did not need to sit at the table of her master to eat; all that she needed was just some scraps. For those who have faith, the scraps that fall from the table of the Lord are as nourishing as the food that is served at the table.

By healing the daughter of this foreign woman, Jesus teaches that the time has come to pull down all barriers dividing peoples. The new people of God have to be open to all, as Jesus himself gives us an example. We cannot reserve our love only to those who are like us. Perhaps all these people we despise as not being good Christians have more faith than us, as the Canaanite was!

Let me finish by pointing out two things. 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! God bless you all!

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



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