

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2011

The readings of this Sunday talk about God's salvation as destined for all the people and its consequence for us. In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah reminds the people of Israel that they have to live in righteousness because God's justice is about to be revealed and his salvation is about to be implemented. However, that salvation is not destined for Israel alone, but for all the peoples and the foreigners who have accepted the Lord and respect his covenant and his commandments. The Lord will bring them all to his holy mountain in order to adore him so that his house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.

A double truth is at the origin of this prophecy. First of all, there is the fact that the concept of salvation in Israel was at the beginning one-sided. In fact, the Israelites had always thought that God's salvation was for them only, at the exclusion of other nations. For that reason, they remained closed on themselves and regarded other peoples as God's enemies. It was only later on, through the work of the prophets who came to understand that God wanted all the peoples to know him and to be saved, that the universal perspective of salvation slowly gained strength in Israel.

This double perspective is present, in a contrasted way, in today's Gospel as Jesus heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman. First of all, the Gospel says that Jesus withdrew in the region of Tyre and Sidon. Given the enmity between the Jews and the non-Jews, the presence of Jesus in this pagan territory marks the beginning of the openness of the word of God to people other than the Israelites.

The Gospel says also that a woman came to him and implored for the healing of her daughter. I would like to stop a little bit on the words used by this woman to address Jesus: "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!" If you read the word of God with attention, you will realize that in the whole Bible, this is the only prayer addressed to Jesus. On many occasions, Jesus prays to the Father or teaches the disciples how to pray to the Father. But here, it is a question of someone addressing Jesus directly for her needs.

This prayer "Lord, Son of David, have pity on me" plays a big role in contemplative outreach and in Centering prayer. Those who are accustomed to this type of prayer know well the power of the prayer done in the name of Jesus as a source of blessing and grace. For many years, the fathers and mothers of the desert, nuns and monks in the cloisters and monasteries, without neglecting the other devotions and forms of prayer, have put the Jesus-prayer at the center of their lives. They repeat it constantly as they breath, they walk, they work and they sleep, in order to remain in permanent contact with the Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

As the woman was following Jesus all the way with a repeated cry for her sick daughter without Jesus reacting, the disciples finally intervened and brought Jesus to give her what she wanted, but not without Jesus having tested her faith. That is why, as Jesus used harsh words in order to show that his work was, first, destined to the lost children of Israel, the woman showed her faith in words that were just pathetic: "Please, Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters".

In fact, what that woman wanted was not to eat at the table of the master. She would be more than happy to eat the scraps that were thrown to the houndedogs. For those who

have faith, indeed, even the scraps that fall from the Lord's Table are as nourishing as the food that is served at the table. It is for that reason that Jesus admired and commended the faith of this woman by healing her daughter.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The first thing we learn is that the Church is universal and made up of all the peoples. In fact, by going in a pagan territory and by healing over there while the Jewish Law prohibited it, Jesus is inviting us to overcome the prejudices we have for one another and the barriers that divide us. As long as we dwell in these, the work of God will suffer a lot. It is only when we open our hearts to the others and accept them, in spite of our differences, that the work of evangelization can have a fruitful outcome.

A second thing we learn is about the apparent silence of God. In fact, each one of us has had an experience where we had a net impression that our prayer was not heard and that God was walking away, leaving us with our problems. In such moments, most of us were discouraged and some had just given up. The Canaanite woman reminds us that it is only through perseverance that we can see the result of our prayers.

I would like to say also something about God's timing. In fact, God's time is not our time. We probably want God to answer our prayers right away, but he has his time to gladden us and console us. That is what happened to the Canaanite woman. Eventually, Jesus healed her daughter; but what patience, courage and perseverance she had to show before all that came to her.

Another thing I want to say is about the importance of intercession. As we see in the Gospel, Jesus came to talk to this woman and heal her daughter, thanks to the intercession of the disciples. Sometimes, we have people who ask us to pray for them and we do not take it seriously; and yet it is important. This Gospel teaches us that we have to pray for one another before God. We have to bring the needs of our fellows in our prayer in the presence of the Lord. We are the intercessors of one another.

The last point I want to bring is about the power of faith. In fact, Jesus admires the Canaanite woman, not because of her character and her beauty, but because of her faith. As I said once, faith is more than about things we know about God. It is all about our trust in the Lord that, even if it is difficult, he will be merciful with us and respond to our prayer. Moreover, we should never forget that God gives to us according to our persevering faith. This is an evident invitation that we, too, trust the Lord in our prayer.

It is that faith which was not effective in the Jews, as they did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, St Paul says. But, there is still a hope that one day Israel will accept Jesus and dedicate itself to him. Let us, then, pray that the Lord may help us to trust him in every happening of life. Let us open our hearts and welcome each other in Christ Jesus, as brothers and sisters. God bless you all!

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



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