

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2017

The readings of this Sunday talk about the universality of salvation. They show that God calls all peoples of the earth, without distinction, so that they come to know him and acknowledge him as their creator. They invite us to respect those who do not share the same conviction of faith with us, because all are God's children.

The first reading describes the call of Isaiah to the people of Israel to live in righteousness and justice in order to deserve God's salvation. It affirms also that God's salvation is destined to all peoples of the earth who have at heart his covenant and his commands. It highlights the benefits God will give them as he will bring them to his holy mountain, admit them in his temple and accept their offerings.

What is behind this text is the idea that God belongs to all the nations of the earth. There is also the idea that God is inclusive and open to all the people of the earth. The last idea is the truth that, because God is open to all the people, salvation is universal and the church open to everybody.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman. First of all, the Gospel starts with the trip of Jesus to the region of Tyre and Sidon. It talks about a Canaanite woman who came to Jesus begging for the healing of her daughter who was tormented by a demon.

Then, it reports about the silence of Jesus to her plea that recalls the exclusivity with which the Jews in general conceived of salvation as something that belonged to them alone. In the end, the Gospel shows how the woman obtained the healing of her daughter because of her courage, perseverance and unshakable faith.

What do we learn from today's readings? Today I want to talk about the universality of salvation. In order to do it, I will formulate it under a series of claims. The first claim is that the Church is universal and made up of all the people. This claim finds its foundation in the words of the prophet Isaiah who says that the foreigners who turn to the Lord and keep his commands will be accepted in the house of the Lord and the house of the Lord itself will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples.

If all the people, without distinction, can be received in the house of the Lord, it means that God's salvation is universal and addressed to all the peoples of all the nations. For that reason, nobody is excluded before God and anyone who changes his life and believes in God is accepted by him. This claim is also supported by the action and the teaching of Jesus.

In fact, by travelling to the pagan land of Tyre and Sidon and by healing over there, while the Jewish Law prohibited any contact with the pagans, Jesus shows that God's salvation is universal and destined to all the people of the earth. Moreover, by going to a pagan territory, against the background of the Jewish Law, Jesus invites us to overcome the prejudices we have for one another and the barriers we build to separate us one from the other. He challenges us so that we live as brothers and sisters and accept each other as children of God.

The second claim is that the silence of God is just apparent, because he always answers our prayers. This claim finds its foundation in the fact that, though the Canaanite woman who was following Jesus did not receive any attention from him, Jesus eventually answered her prayer by healing her daughter, thanks to the intercession of the disciples.

In that sense, what happened to the Canaanite woman gives us a lesson to understand how God deals with us when we call upon him in our prayers. This is very important, because each one of us has had an experience where he had the impression that God did not listen to his prayer and that anytime he called upon him, he was walking away, leaving him with his problem. At such moments, most of the people become discouraged and give up on everything, including their faith in God.

The Canaanite woman, on the contrary, reminds us that it is only by persevering in our prayer that we can obtain what we want. Therefore, God answers our prayers, but he needs also our perseverance. Moreover, because it requires perseverance, it means also that God has his own time to answer our prayer.

In fact, God does not count according to the human calendar, but according to his time, which is different from ours. Though we want an immediate answer to our prayer, God reserves for himself the time, the form under which it will be and the right to respond when he judges adequate. What he requires of us is perseverance, as it was in the case with the Canaanite woman. Jesus eventually healed her daughter; but she had to show patience, courage and determination.

The third claim is that the intercession of brothers and sisters is a tool that brings God's blessing upon us. This claim finds its foundation in the attitude of the disciples who interceded in favor of the Canaanite woman. Because of that intercession, Jesus finished by listening to her request and healed her daughter. That is an indication to each one of us that we have to pray for one another, as well as we have to take it seriously when people ask for our prayer when they are crossing difficult times.

The last claim is that if your faith is not strong enough to displace the mountain, make it at least perseverant so that you might climb the mountain. This claim finds its foundation in the attitude of the Canaanite woman who did not give up even when Jesus used strong words of comparing her to a dog. Such a faith is not about the knowledge of the things of God, but trust in God. After all, God gives us according to our persevering and trusting faith. The more we trust him, the more he gives us according to the degree of our trust in him. May God bless you and help you to trust him in everything!

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

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