

This Sunday's Readings – the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Today's readings are as follows:

- Isaiah 56:1, 6-7
- Psalm 67:2-3, 5-6, 8
- Romans 11:13-15, 29-32
- Matthew 15:21-28

The main theme of today's readings is simply this – salvation is for all, not just the Chosen People.

The first reading is from Isaiah, chapter 56 (the first chapter of 3rd Isaiah, which was written shortly after the return of the Israelites from Babylon). This reading was directed not only to the Jews who returned to a destroyed Jerusalem but also to those Jews who decided to stay in Babylon. The prophet here was imploring those Jews in Babylon to return home, but many still decided to stay in Babylon and thus began the Diaspora. There were also many foreigners (Gentiles) mingling with the Israelites after the return from Babylon. In this reading, God specifies that they too are welcome if they follow the laws of the covenant. The Jews did not like that because it meant that anyone (Jew or Gentile) could enter the temple and minister there if they followed the Law. They felt that they were no longer the Chosen Ones. In fact, Yahweh treats the Gentiles better than the Jews did. As God says in verse 7, “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples”. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2002 syndicated column for *The Messenger* adds this comment on today's first reading – “The prophet's oracle disturbs most Jews. They believe the temple — Yahweh's house — is their house of prayer and only theirs. They forbid Gentiles, under pain of death, to go beyond an exterior courtyard. It's significant that Third-Isaiah begins his oracle by talking about “Yahweh's justice being about to be revealed.” Since justice in Scripture almost always refers to the relationship God has with God's people, the prophet is reminding his audience that Yahweh relates to Gentiles in a more intimate way than Yahweh's people relate to Gentiles. The prophet believes everyone has a part to play in God's plan — even those who don't belong to the “true religion.”” Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on the theme of universalism in today's first reading – “This is not unqualified universalism. But it is, at least in a symbolic way, a prophecy foreshadowing the universalism of the gospel. It points to the time when the temple of God will be a house of prayer for all people; it thus points forward to the effects of Christ's redeeming work. Mark, or the tradition before him, puts these words on Jesus' lips as an interpretation of his cleansing of the temple ([Mark 11:17](#)). John further interprets that event by taking it as an act of prophetic symbolism, declaring the replacement of the old temple by the temple of Jesus' body ([John 2:19-21](#)). It is there that the text of Isaiah 56:7 comes to its final fulfillment. This passage was chosen today because of the universalist implications of the episode of the Canaanite woman in the gospel reading”.

This message is carried forth in the Gospel reading from Matthew. This is the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, who sought out Jesus to cure her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Again, Matthew modifies Mark's account of this story and adapts

it to his time (mid 80's AD) and his community (Jewish Christians). Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment on the differences between Mark and Matthew's version of this story – "Matthew took over the story of the Canaanite woman from Mark, but with several important changes:

1. The woman is called a Canaanite instead of a Syro-Phoenician.
2. There is considerable expansion of the dialogue material in the body of the story (vv. 22-24).
3. Jesus praises the woman for her faith (v. 28).
4. Matthew removes Jesus' saying that the children (that is, Israel) must be fed first.
5. The narrative of the woman's return home to discover that her daughter was cured of the demon is reduced to a brief statement that the girl was indeed healed (unlike Mark, Matthew is not interested in the fact that the healing was performed from a distance).

It may well be that Matthew had access to an alternative version of the healing, perhaps a more primitive one (so Bultmann and Lohmeyer). In any case, Matthew's alterations have a theological rather than a historical motivation. He shifts the interest away from the miracle to the woman's faith". Fr. Roger Karban in his 2002 syndicated column for *The Messenger* adds this comment on the differences between Mark and Matthew's version of this story – "Since the historical Jesus is more interested in reforming his own people than in bringing non-Jews into "the fold," he seldom has anything to do with Gentiles. Today's Gospel encounter is a rarity. Copying this passage from Mark, Matthew changes it around just enough to turn Jesus' initial refusal to help the Canaanite mother into a test of her faith. The climactic line is, "O woman, great is your faith!" Matthew simply uses the story to remind his Jewish/Christian readers that Gentile/Christians often have more faith and trust in Jesus than they have". As a Canaanite, this woman would have no knowledge of the law of the covenant. Yet she, unlike the Jews, recognizes Jesus as the Son of God. She is very persistent and that persistence has irritated the disciples, who in turn ask Jesus to send her away. Jesus replies that He "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". Sounds very exclusivistic. However, she will not be deterred. Jesus' dialogue with this woman then appears to be very sarcastic. Not true. This is a perfect example of not understanding the culture at that time. As the commentator of *Scriptures Soundings* explains – "To do so, however, would be to fail to recognize an ancient mode of Semitic dialogue and wit that matches wise aphorism with wise aphorism or riddle with riddle. Jesus tosses off a maxim "(the children and the dogs) "to the woman and she turns it around on Him to her own advantage. Jesus is impressed. He acknowledges her wisdom and praises her faith". Even though she is not a Jew, Jesus recognizes her great faith and devotion to her ailing daughter and cures the woman's

daughter. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus offers salvation to everyone, not just the Israelites.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these comments on today's Gospel reading – "(Two) aspects of Mediterranean culture place this reading in a fresh perspective'

HONOR AND SHAME

When he sent the Twelve on mission, Jesus directed them to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and urged them to steer clear of the Gentiles and Samaritans (Matt 10:5-6). Now Jesus himself heads in pagan direction, toward Tyre and Sidon, and is met by a pagan (Canaanite) woman from that region (v. 21). Will he contradict himself? This would be a shameful reversal of his earlier honorable charge to the Twelve.

CHALLENGE AND RIPOSTE

Always keep in mind the very public dimension of life in the Middle East. There is always a crowd at hand to watch, judge, and decide whether to grant honor or impute shame. The Canaanite woman uses the crowd to her advantage and hurls a challenge at Jesus. Like others in the gospel, she cleverly addresses Jesus with an honorific title: "Lord, Son of David" and uses this title as a basis for her request: "have mercy on me." In the Middle Eastern world, mercy is a sensitivity to and sense of responsibility for one's debts to God and other human beings. People who ask for mercy feel they are owed something; people who show mercy acknowledge and pay what they owe. The woman's plea is based on recognizing Jesus' Davidic ancestry and hoping he will act in accord with the reputation of the great King David. He will offer a remedy, perhaps a cure, for her demon-tormented daughter. Jesus is not obliged to answer the challenge. The woman is a pagan, he is an Israelite. They are not equals, and the honor game can only be played by equals. Following the honor code of his culture, Jesus ignores her. The woman is not put off. She continues to follow the crowd and shriek after Jesus and his disciples (v. 23). Her behavior undoubtedly attracts an even larger crowd. The disciples urge Jesus to send her away. Their suggestion is unclear: send the woman away by healing her daughter or without doing so? Jesus' answer seems to imply that the disciples meant the former. He continues to refuse by citing his commitment "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the woman is not to be denied. She comes forward, kneels respectfully to honor Jesus, and again uses the honorific title, "Lord" This time her plea is simple and moving: "Help me" Jesus responds harshly and argues against throwing the children's food to dogs. This is an enormous insult to the woman. Gentiles were commonly referred to as dogs. Jesus apparently repeats his culture's stereotype. Calling a woman a dog is offensive in every language. Jesus has no qualms. To everyone's amazement, including Jesus, the woman retorts with cleverness: "Lord [note the honorific title], even dogs eat crumbs that fall from their master's table" (v. 27). The woman proves she can give as good as she gets. She is equal to the game of challenge and riposte. She is the only person in the Gospels who proves to be a good match for Jesus' wit. The fact is not lost on

Jesus. He responds with the equivalent of “touché!” and grants her request. The daughter is healed instantly”.

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