

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Today's readings are all coming from a Jewish point of view. Their starting point is that the Jews are God's chosen people while non-Jews are in darkness and need to be shown the light by being introduced to the true God. This is not mere missionary propaganda but stems from the Jewish conviction that God is supremely merciful and just and when all people come to this realisation they will appreciate the divine goodness, justice and compassion and attach themselves to God.

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 The anonymous prophet writing in the time just after the Babylonian exile (the late 500s BCE) is assuring his people that one of the signs of the new restoration will be the readiness of other nations to acknowledge the God of Israel. In the previous chapter (55) the prophet spelt out the divine invitation to come to God, the source of all that constitutes a quality life and fulfilment:

Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,

Now, in this chapter, the author is encouraging all people, Jews and non-Jews alike, to change their ways and embrace the God of all goodness. The Jews living just after the long exile in Babylon needed to refocus their lives and renew their commitment to God. For Gentiles, it means seeing the truth and entering into a covenant relationship with God. The promise is of a fruitful and joyful life.

Psalms 67 This psalm sings of the theology of Second Isaiah and resonates with the thrill of being released from exile in Babylon. The poet rejects the idea that humans had the power to save themselves from drought, famine and annihilation from war. The cycle of the seasons was proof enough that God was controlled the forces of nature with care and blessing.

The psalmist insists that devotion to the Almighty had nothing to do with the magic that featured in other cultures. All good things were gifts from God, and this religion left no room for praying to various deities for control of the weather.

There is a hidden plea here for the people of the covenant that they might be an example of justice and compassion to all the nations. The first Christians were conscious of their call to live up to their professed commitment and to give good example by their lifestyle. As Jesus said: 'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Metanoia involves a change of lifestyle with a new set of priorities

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 The second reading continues that section of Paul's letter to the Romans where he is wrestling with the question: what will happen to the good people of Israel who have not accepted Jesus Christ? He expresses the hope that the Jews of his day will see the joy and commitment of the Christians and be won over to faith in Jesus Christ.

He highlights his call to be an apostle to the Gentiles and notes how so many Gentiles have changed direction in their lives toward the God of all goodness. This change of direction is what is meant by the Greek word *metanoia*, which is often translated as repentance. However, *metanoia* implies a lot more than sorrow for sin or repentance for wrongdoing; it has a positive goal which is a change of lifestyle with a new set of priorities, putting sound relationships with God and others first.

Paul's enigmatic statement in the last verse of this reading is that human beings created by God are weak to the extent that they will selfishly go against goodness and put themselves in a state of noncompliance. But God will use this rebellion as an opportunity to exercise unlimited graciousness and compassion. God will never pass up an opportunity to show compassion.

Matthew 15:21-28 The Gospel reading from Matthew 15 is a little confronting at first sight because it looks as if Jesus is unwilling to help the mother in her distress. Leaving his native Galilee, Jesus and his band head northward to the land of the Phoenicians, present day Lebanon. A woman, who had possibly heard Jesus speak or had been told of his reputation as a healer, came to ask a favour. Her daughter had a condition that was interpreted in those days as being possessed by a demon. In general,

people who suffered from physical or mental illnesses that had no apparent medical explanation were thought to be possessed by demons or unclean spirits.

Matthew tells us that Jesus virtually ignored the woman because he did not give her any reply. This strikes us as out of character since Jesus usually showed great compassion to people in distress. It is obvious she is in distress because she begs Jesus to help *her*, not her daughter. The daughter's condition is driving the mother to distraction. What is equally unusual is that the woman, a Canaanite, as Matthew refers to her, addresses Jesus as Son of David. Elsewhere in this gospel (20:30), the expression 'son of David' is interpreted as a mark of faith in Jesus as messiah, but here, Jesus does not respond to the woman's declaration or her request.

She persists and the disciples urge Jesus to send her away because she keeps on nagging. At this point Jesus gives us a clue to the way he sees his mission, that is, exclusively directed to the people of Israel. His reply to the woman certainly strikes us as harsh, particularly as he refers to the Gentiles as dogs when he says, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the housedogs.' The Jews looked on Gentiles as dogs because, like dogs, they ate all kinds of food and even ate food considered unclean by Jewish standards.

Jesus is stressing the priority of his mission to the people of Israel

It is pretty clear that Jesus is quoting a common saying here to help make his point that the people of Israel should receive his word and ministry before the Gentiles. The focus in his reply is not on the word 'dogs' with its implied insult but on the fact that it is not right to deny food to the children. The *food* and *dogs* metaphor is far less important in this episode than the primacy of Jesus' mission to the people of Israel. Jesus is stressing his priority, and he is not going to be easily deflected from it. But neither is the Canaanite woman going to be deflected from her purpose for she comes back with, 'Even the housedogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master's table.' She does not dispute Jesus' point of view but argues that he should still help her. In effect, she is pushing him think outside the box; to reset his compass and broaden his ministry to include Gentiles.

Straightaway Jesus can see the strength of purpose in this woman, and he appreciates her reply as a king hit. She has not been put off but has remained firm in her trust that Jesus can and will do something to help her. Her trust and determination have caused Jesus to reassess the situation and his own priorities. This is not only a turnaround but a learning exercise for him – even non-Jews can show extraordinary trust.

Jesus' next statement is yet another of his congratulatory responses. A close reading of any of the Gospels could possibly surprise us if we counted up the number of times Jesus offers a verbal pat on the back to individuals he encounters. Expressions like 'go in peace, your faith has made you well,' 'in no one in Israel have I found such faith,' 'take heart, son, your sins are forgiven,' must have been spoken with an encouraging manner and a reassuring smile. In this case, the woman's reply is a brilliant response to Jesus' apparent indifference. Again, it is possible that she is quoting a well-known proverb and she is giving as good as she gets. Her persistence and trust are rewarded with the healing of her daughter.

Matthew is showing how Jesus is providing a lesson in trust and persistence for his disciples and at the same time reminds his conservative, and largely Jewish community, that Jesus is there for Jew and Gentile alike. Anyone can approach him and gain satisfaction if they are moved by trust and commitment.



Telling someone they are appreciated is one of the simplest and most uplifting things they can hear.

Anonymous



Three young boys were boasting about how fast their fathers could run. Two of them cited medals their fathers had won, and the third boy said. 'My dad's faster than your dads, he works for the council. He knocks off at five and he's always home by three-thirty.'

Laurie Woods