

## Be catholic, be universal!

**Twentieth Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – August 16, 2020**

**Readings:** Isa 56:1, 6-7; Rom 11:13-15, 29-32; Mt 15:21-28

*“Woman, great is your faith!”* (Mt 15:28)

Prologue: Besides its denominational meaning, being ‘*catholic*’ means being universal, all-embracing, of broad interests or wide sympathies. In line with the teachings and thrust of our Lord Jesus’ mission, the Catholic faith and Catholics too have always sought to reach out to all peoples, since Christ came not to serve and save only a small minority, but the whole world. Thus, today’s readings can be interpreted in the light of the tension between narrow exclusivism versus catholic universalism.

### Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The Jew-Gentile division and discrimination has a long history, which partly forms the background for the first reading from so-called ‘Third Isaiah’ (chs 56 onward). Prior to the Babylonian Exile, ‘foreigners’ were allowed to perform only certain functions in the temple precincts. In fact, Ezekiel had objected to allowing uncircumcised ‘foreigners’ near the temple (44:9). However, the context of this passage is post-exilic—i.e., after the return of the Israelites from the Exile (538 BC)—which was like a ‘second liberation’, so to say, the first being their exodus from slavery to freedom under the leadership of Moses. Now, through Prophet Isaiah, Yahweh predicts that “in my house of prayer; *their* [i.e., foreigners’ or Gentiles’] burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer *for all peoples*” (v.7). Note that worship of God will expand and extend to ‘*all peoples*’ far beyond the ‘chosen’—and, often, closed—‘circle’ of Jews. Today’s passage specifies just two conditions under which the foreigners may worship God, namely, they must “keep the Sabbath, and .... hold fast my covenant” (v.6). The tone of universality and inclusiveness is clear and unmistakable, and different from earlier passages of Israelite ‘election’ and exclusiveness.
2. The gospel passage reiterates the point made in the first reading with Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman. Some parts and phrases of the passage are not easy to understand and must be seen in the light of Jesus’ conflict with the “Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem” who criticize him and his disciples who “break the traditions of the elders” (Mt 15:1-2). The Pharisees nurtured ‘holier-than-thou’ attitudes since they held that they were ‘chosen’, faithful to the Covenant and observed Mosaic Law meticulously. However, in this chapter 15, Jesus calls them “*hypocrites*” (v.7) and unmasks their hollow holiness (vv.1-20). As today’s narrative begins, “Jesus left Gennesaret and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.” Note that Jesus leaves the supposed ‘holy land’ to enter Gentile territory. On the one hand, the Canaanite woman has neither social standing nor religious worth to be approaching Jesus—for she is ‘twice despised’ being a Canaanite and a woman. But, on the other hand, her cry of helplessness emerges from a heart that is fear-less and faith-full: “*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David ....*” (v.22). Her cry reveals Jesus’ double-identity: as ‘*Lord*’ going upward to God and thus meant for *all* people, and as ‘*Son of David*’, thus descending from a particular heritage and tradition. Sensing ‘*who*’ Jesus is and ‘*where*’ he has come from, she cries out for mercy.

3. The woman cries out: “have mercy on *me*”; the ‘*me*’ refers to her daughter tormented by a demon. Jesus “did not answer her at all” (v.23). Acting like any other Jew of the day, the disciples urge Jesus, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” The disciples see the woman as a nuisance: a problem to be silenced and sent away. Not so with Jesus—who has so far perhaps viewed himself and built his identity within the narrow confines of Israel and Judaism. Thus, Jesus replies: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v.24). Undeterred by Jesus’ hesitation, the woman “came and *knelt* before him, saying, *Lord*, help me’.” (v.25). No longer does she address Jesus as ‘Son of David’ but only ‘*Lord*’—the God whom she believes is universal and who has the welfare of *all peoples* at heart. Jesus’ retort: “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the house-dogs!” might seem unbecoming of a teacher of his stature. Christian critics might even go so far as to say that Jesus demeans the woman. However, (a) Greek scholars explain that ‘house-dog’ is used in diminutive form that indicates affection just as one uses the word ‘rascal’ playfully; and, (b) Unlike in Jewish houses wherein dogs were not allowed inside the house, in Gentile houses they were allowed. So, while Jesus seems to suggest that he would have to go ‘*outside*’ the Jewish family circle to heed her need, by answering, “Yes, *Lord*, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (v.27), she agrees that the food belongs to the children, or, in theological terms, that “salvation is from the Jews” (Jn 4:22). Nonetheless, she appeals to Jesus’ universal outreach as ‘*Lord*’ and agrees to receive even the crumbs that Jesus will offer. Isn’t that deep faith? Seeing her throwing overboard all exclusive, manmade divisions of gender, religion, ritualism, ethnicity, purity-pollution, etc., Jesus praises her faith publicly: “Woman, great is your faith!” Her daughter is healed “instantly”.

### **Linking the Second Reading and Psalm to the Theme of Exclusivism vs. Universalism:**

Paul—who believed that God had called him to be an ‘apostle to the Gentiles’ (v.13 and also Acts 9:15)—never forgot that he was a Jew by birth and tirelessly tried to win over his people to new life in Christ. But, he also felt that his proclamation of Good News to the Gentiles would, in his words, “make my own people jealous of you,” (v.14) thereby inducing them to accept his message. Paul believed that the ‘end’ was imminent. Flawed though his end-time prediction was, Paul’s view in v.29 that: “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable,” is significant. Division and discrimination between ‘We’, ‘chosen’ and ‘They’, Gentiles, is unacceptable in Christianity; for, as today’s psalm (67) proclaims, “Let the peoples praise you, O God; let *all* the peoples praise you!” Indeed, if one is really ‘catholic’ then one cannot but be ‘universal’. Like Jesus.

### **In Lighter Vein:**

A man was boasting about the superiority of Catholicism and the holiness of his priests to a Hindu and Muslim friend. Debating at the crossroads, they spied a sadhu going into a brothel. “Saw that?” sneered the Catholic, “Our priests won’t be seen *there!*” Minutes later, a mullah covered his face with his shawl and entered the brothel too. The Catholic remarked, “Ah, ha, mullahs are no better than sadhus!” Just then the parish priest also slyly entered the brothel. The Catholic sighed sanctimoniously, “I wonder which of those girls is sick and in need of sacraments!” Strangely, ‘we’ are always holier than ‘they’ just as the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ time claimed superiority over Gentiles. In Jesus, there is no ‘we’ and ‘they’. We are ONE—all children of God!

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