

**Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A  
(Aug. 14, 2011)**

***Come One, Come All!***

There are many people who appear in our Gospels, the little people I call them, who have their fifteen minutes of fame and then disappear from the scene, never to be heard of again. People like Zacchaeus, Jairus and Mrs. Jairus and their daughter, the widow of Naim and her son, the lepers, the blind who were cured, the paralytics who received back the gift of wholeness, who could leap and dance for joy after Jesus touched them, and countless others. I often wonder what happened to them. Their lives must have been completely changed as a result of this encounter with Jesus.

We meet another one in our Gospel story today, an extraordinary one. The Canaanite woman is a fascinating personality. She is a woman in a male dominated society. She is a foreigner who ventures into a Jewish milieu. Although she is a Gentile and a pagan who presumably knows little or nothing about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, she has faith in Jesus. When Jesus seems detached and distant and does not pay attention to her, she refuses to give up. Her faith is persistent. She has daring and a sense of humor. And because of her persistent faith, her daring, and her sense of humor not only does she win the favor she is asking, she ends up being one of the most highly commended persons in the Gospels.

Apart from the anecdotal value, the passage has a deeper, theological meaning. Like the other evangelists Matthew is teaching theology by telling stories. And the deeper meaning here is about God's universal salvific will. God wants all people to be saved. Gentiles, represented by the Canaanite woman, as well as Jews, are welcomed at the table of the Lord. Jesus' seeming indifference, indeed his insulting way of speaking to the woman, is, it seems to me, a dramatic device to make the turn around at the end of the story even more vivid.

All the readings this Sunday revolve around the theme of universalism. The first reading from Isaiah is part of a remarkable oracle that sees people of all backgrounds making their way to the temple for sacrificial worship. In the sixth century before Christ Isaiah says something

startling and unheard of: sacrifices offered by Gentiles, by people considered unclean, will be acceptable to God.

Paul uses language that is just as frank and uncustomary. He says he will boast of his accomplishments and make his own people jealous to let them know that God wants all people at the table.

In the Gospel story Jesus at first seems reluctant to help the Canaanite woman but because of her faith and her persistence he changes his mind and extends his healing power to the Gentile woman and her daughter.

Now in spite of Jesus' seeming reluctance here we know that Matthew's perspective is universalist. At the beginning of his Gospel he tells the story of the Wise Men who come from the East to pay homage to the new-born king. And at the end of his Gospel he has Jesus tell his disciples to go out to the whole world, preaching the good news to all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if, in addition to the general idea of universalism, there might be something a bit more specific that God is saying to us today. Isaiah's vision in the first reading, Paul's certitude in the second reading, and what is at least hinted at in the Gospel passage all point to something that might seem highly unlikely, if not downright impossible, and that is the eventual union of Christians and Jews.

Not that all Jews would accept Jesus as their Messiah, and certainly not that Christians would reject him, but that through deeper understanding and respect both groups would come closer together. Efforts of course have already been made to this end and great progress has occurred especially since the Second Vatican Council. We can only applaud and encourage such efforts. In their own way they help bring about what God said through the prophet Isaiah: My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. For all peoples – and that includes not only Jews and Christians but also Muslims and Hindus and everyone else God has put on this earth.