

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time: One Church

Today's readings are challenging. What is the Church trying to say to us by relating the dialogue that Jesus had with the Canaanite woman? And what in the world is St. Paul saying when he writes that because of the disobedience of the Jews the Gentiles were freed from their disobedience and, as a result, the Jews turned from their disobedience.

And what does all this have to do with us, people of 21st century America?

It has everything to do with us. The readings are about inclusion, the call to One Church, to One Kingdom, a kingdom that refuses to exclude those seeking God.

The Canaanite woman wins healing for her daughter by showing Jesus her faith in Him. She even humbles herself when He said that the gifts of the Messiah, the food of the Jewish people, should not be shared with the dogs, the Gentiles. She responds that even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table, a common practice in meals where there are no utensils, just pieces of bread that are dipped into the stew pot, then dropped onto the floor rather than be re-dipped into the pot. It is clear from the Gospel that the faith of the gentiles, their openness to the wonders of God, has earned them a place at His table, the Banquet of Life.

Let's tackle that second reading from *Romans* this way: suppose we go back to the days that St. Paul wrote the *Letter to the Romans*. Now let's make believe that the left side of the Church represents the Hebrew people throughout the world and the right side represents the Gentiles, all the known people of Paul's day, everyone from Britons to the people of Asia. Paul first preaches to the Hebrews, but they refuse to submit to Jesus Christ. They are disobedient to the call of their own prophets as well as the preaching of the evangelists. Because they are disobedient, closed to evangelization, Paul turns to the Gentiles, the right side of the church. Now these Gentiles had been going against their consciences. They had been performing all sorts of immoral acts that they knew were wrong. Paul alludes to this in the beginning of *Romans*, *Romans 1:18-32*. This was their disobedience.

Paul's preaching called the gentiles from disobedience. They were transformed. They had been living, as Henry David Thoreau would later write, lives of silent desperation. But with Christianity, their lives had meaning, and purpose and fulfillment. They received eternal life. They lived in joy.

Now the Jewish people saw the joy of the gentile converts and said, "Wait, we want some of that. We want to be happy. We want to know that there is more to life than living for ourselves. We want the spiritual. We want God." Therefore, the disobedience of the gentiles was transformed by the mercy of God to eternal happiness. This led to the Jews taking a step away from their disobedience to accepting the new way of life, the Christian way of life.

It would take time, but the Church came to a deep understanding that there is no right side or left side of the Church, nor are there people who are more worthy of the promise of Christ than others. The Church realized that it was universal, it was Catholic, the word that means universal. The Church is made up of people from various backgrounds, but all part of One Church. The Catholic Church is not just European, nor is it just American. The Catholic Church is also Asian, South American, African, Australian etc. All are part of the one Church called to accept the spiritual, called to eternal life. Think of the Church as a tapestry with various colors of threads all forming one picture, or as a mosaic with various different tiles all forming a great work of art.

Just as the gentiles and the Jews became blessings for each other, all the people of the Catholic Church are a blessing for each other.

I experienced the universality of the Church so clearly a long time ago when I was able to assist at the Pentecost Mass said by St. John Paul II. Yup, it was just me and the Pope, and about 100 other priests, 20 bishops and all sorts of cardinals. The Pope confirmed people from all over the world, and did so in 22 different languages. After Mass, I joined my parents in the Piazza San Pedro, the square in front of St. Peters, where thousands of people from all over the world gathered for the Pope's Sunday blessing. Hearing all these different languages, seeing all these people from every continent, I was overwhelmed by the fact that this is who we are, this is what it means to be part of the universal Church. This is what it means to be Catholic. We are Asian. We are American. We are Australian. We are African. We are European. We are Catholic.

The world needs us to be Catholic. Our country needs us to be Catholic. In the First Eucharistic Prayer for Various Needs, entitled *The Church on the Path of Unity*, we have the petition: ***In a world torn by strife may your people shine forth as a prophetic sign of unity and love.*** Recent events in our country are calling us more than ever to be this prophetic sign of unity amid our diversity. The world needs to see one body of people with diverse backgrounds all forming that tapestry, that mosaic, that is the People of God. The world needs to experience in the Catholic Church the prophetic sign that diverse people can become one unified person. We have to be a sign that our strength comes from the bond of love that does not accept any form of exclusion of any peoples. The world needs to witness our living out what we proclaim with our Creed: We are One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic.

Who belongs here? Who belongs in the Church? All people belong here. All people are called to form Church. May our country and all nations see in the unity of the Catholic Church a prophetic sign that diverse people can unite in love.