

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Isaiah 56.1, 6-7)

God saves all nations

One of the great results of the disastrous Sack of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the exile of the Jews in Babylon was the growing realisation that Israel had been chosen to bring God's healing not only to her own people but to the peoples of the world.

I shall lead them all to my Holy Mountain, promises the Lord. In the gospel, we will see this put into action when Jesus is manoeuvred into healing the Canaanite woman's daughter, beyond the bounds of Israel.

What does this mean for us today, in the twenty-first century, whose watchword - as Nelson Mandela once said - is globalization? Our God is concerned for the salvation of all peoples, and it is for us to bring the values of Christianity to all nations. But our God is truly God of all nations, and we have no right to force our own appreciation of God's ways of acting onto other civilizations who understand in their own way what we express by the Lordship of God, the salvation won by Christ's loving obedience, and spread by the Spirit of Christ. To fail to appreciate the other great religions of the world is an act not of homage to the Christian God but of failure to appreciate the divine omniscience and omnipotence.

Question:

How is it that believers in other religions are still saved by Christ?

Second reading:

(Romans 11.13-15, 29-32)

The Obedience of all Nations

It is by chance that the reading from Romans coincides with both the other two readings, for Paul is here really meditating on, and distraught by, the failure of most of the Jews to respond to the salvation promised to them in Christ.

It is indeed a devastating puzzle that God should have prepared his people for the completion of his Kingdom in Christ and that, despite all this, they did not respond. But were the Jews especially unresponsive, especially rebellious? Or are they just typical of us all?

One of the reasons why the New Testament makes such a meal of the failure of the Jews to respond is surely as a warning to us. We have been chosen. We have been buried into Christ's death and now live with Christ's life, and yet our response is pretty lukewarm and spasmodic. To use Paul's dramatic image of the olive tree of Israel, if the true branches can be cut off to make room for the gentiles to be grafted in, then surely the grafted branches can fail to take on the life of the vine. However, such is Paul's conviction of the power of Christ and the victorious Lordship of Christ that he never even mentions hell or eternal punishment. He does not seem to envisage that anyone could escape the saving power of Christ.

Question:

Are the Chosen People still the beloved of God?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 15.21-28)

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman

This is an especially significant scene in two ways. Mark's Gospel was the first to be written, and Matthew edits and expands it, using other sources as well. In Mark, this scene is the only explicit encounter between Jesus and a gentile - and a woman at that! At first, Jesus is reluctant to do anything for her, for his mission was primarily to Israel. He puts her off, and is really quite brusque to her. However, she wins through by her persistence and her determined confidence in his powers: the disciples get fed up with her shrieking after them, and ask Jesus to cure her daughter, which he does.

We need to be persistent in our prayers and in our efforts. God does not grant a casual request. Second, it shows a lot about Jesus' relationship to women and about his sense of humour: they seem to tease one another with their repartee. There is the same repartee in the account of Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John: she stands up to him with her cheeky repartee. They are both obviously enjoying this playful scene. It suggests that not everything is solemn and serious in heaven, and there is room for a sense of humour!

Question:

Is Jesus rude to her, or is he merely challenging her?
