

The theme in today's Readings is that of inclusiveness. In the First Reading, we heard that at the time of Isaiah's writing, there were many foreigners of Gentile, that is, non-Jewish nations living in Israel. The Israelites questioned whether or not the benefits of God's salvation should extend to them. There were many among the Israelites who wished to make the nation pure by excluding all who were tainted by being foreigners. But there were others who saw the need for God's people to reach out to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people. Isaiah writes, the Lord says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

In the Gospel, Jesus addresses the question of whether salvation should be extended to the Gentiles as well. The setting of today's Gospel story, while it is still in Jewish territory, is a place with a high Gentile population. The heart of today's Gospel begins with a lively exchange between Jesus and a Canaanite woman of great faith, a woman who suffers greatly because of the illness of her daughter who is possessed by a devil.

Totally convinced that Jesus can help her hopeless situation, the woman comes forward, kneels at Jesus' feet and asks for her daughter to be cured, crying out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

When Jesus tells her that He has been sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," the woman presses on in faith saying, "Lord, help me." Jesus answers, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus words compare the Israelites to the children of a family of God and the Gentiles to the slang, scavenging dogs. Jesus is sent by His Father to the Israelite people, not to the Gentiles. The woman is not an Israelite, she is a Canaanite and excluded from God's plans for His people.

The woman replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Moved by her humility and her conviction that He is able to heal her daughter, Jesus rewards her faith "and her daughter was healed instantly." If Jesus came up with another reason for not healing her daughter, she would come up with another argument why He should.

The story of the Canaanite woman comes to a fascinating conclusion. Jesus draws attention to the great faith of the mother, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Our healing God is not remote in a far distant sky. Her great faith discovers the presence and power of God right there in her own heart. The woman's persistence and her humiliation with Jesus made her receptive to the healing power of God.

This is one of the rare occasions when we find Jesus in conversation with a woman who is not only a pagan Gentile but who belongs to a nation noted for its traditional hostility to the Jewish people. Nevertheless, Jesus does not regard this as an obstacle to curing the woman's daughter. Jesus gives us an example of openness and acceptance by extending salvation to all nations, well beyond the bounds of Judaism.

The encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman reveals that God has no favourites and that nobody is excluded from His kingdom. Jesus' message is not the exclusive property of the Jewish people but Good News to be shared among all people and nationalities. Jesus' whole mission is to break down barriers and to remove walls of division and prejudice between the Jews and Gentiles. It is a lesson also for our world leaders to do the same thing today so there may be peace among the nations of our troubled world.

Today's Gospel confronts us with our own tendency to cause conflict by promoting exclusiveness. When Jesus accepts a pagan Gentile, it is a hard lesson for the Jewish nation to learn. The early Catholic Church faced a similar problem with regard to the Gentiles. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He commissioned the Apostles to "go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19)

After the ascension of Jesus, the early Church extended its mission to the Jewish people and to the Gentile people. It is our mission today to learn the lesson of Jesus and break down the barriers of division within the world, and primarily within our own communities and within our families. Many of us are prejudiced against some people simply because their political or religious outlook or cultural background differs from our own.

Many people fail to remember that no seat is reserved in heaven for any particular person. God does not discriminate but welcomes all who believe in Him, all who ask for His mercy and forgiveness and seek to do His will. If Jesus could welcome and grant the prayer of the Canaanite woman despite her pagan background, we have to ask ourselves, is there anyone we are rejecting because of differences between us?

The mission of the Church is to be catholic, that is, to be truly *universal*. The Church will never rest until the Gospel reaches every heart, every soul, every life. You and I are part of that mission. As Pope Pius XII said many years ago, “by Baptism, we don’t simply belong to the Church, *we are the Church*.”

On a practical level, we sometimes go to places where priests wouldn’t go. We speak with people who will never speak with a priest. We encounter people who will never see a missionary. We are the only personal experience of a Catholic that many will ever know. Do we take the importance of that fact seriously?

Each of us is here, not because we had a vision or a visit from an angel, but because some human being cared enough to share the Catholic faith with us. Are we willing to do the same with others too? Do we ever share our faith or invite one person to Church and to prayer?

Jesus calls each of us, not only to embrace the Gospel in our life, but to give some of it to others by what we say and do. The more we share Christ with others, the deeper His life grows within us. And the deeper Christ’s life grows within us, the more we want to share Him with others.

In our church community and in our world community everyone should be made to feel they are welcomed. Today, listen carefully to the prayers of the Mass. With outstretched hands in the Eucharistic prayer, the priest prays, “In mercy and love unite *all your children* wherever they may be.” To pray like this is to acknowledge that before God there should be no division among His children anywhere in our world.

Perhaps we, too, need to examine our own cultural prejudices to ensure that none of God’s children are being neglected or rejected, but that we open to welcoming all people. The love and care of our Father reaches beyond the boundaries of nation and race. Jesus, Himself, broke the cultural boundaries of His day to prove this is true.