

20 Sunday OT A – 17 August 2008

LESSON: God's Desire that All be Saved

As I've been doing, during this year of St. Paul, recalling the 2000th anniversary of his birth, I thought I'd focus each week on the 2nd reading – Paul's letters – rather than on the Gospel. BOY! I didn't know what I was getting into!!! And today's reading is NOT easy! In fact, this section of St. Paul's letter to the Romans is a **theological mine-field**.

In chapters 9-11, St Paul deals with a problem that caused him personal **anguish** on an **emotional** level and throughout history has caused theologians countless **headaches** on an **intellectual** level.

He is facing the **mysterious question** of why the Jewish people as a whole did not **accept** Jesus as the Messiah.

- ✍ God had been patiently getting them ready for the Messiah's arrival for almost **2000** years, and yet when Jesus came, he caused **controversy and rejection** more than **joyful welcome**.
- ✍ Paul lists all the **privileges** that the Chosen People had received from God throughout the Old Testament, privileges **unique** to that nation.
- ✍ He calls to mind the unique **role** that God gave the People of Israel in the **history of salvation**, gradually preparing them to **give the world its Savior**.
- ✍ But then he spends the rest of these chapters **wrestling** with the mysterious reality that the nation as a whole did not **recognize and accept** the Messiah when he finally came.
- ✍ Many **individuals** did - St Paul is one of them, the Blessed Virgin Mary is another, the other Apostles did too - but not the whole community of Israelites **as a community**.
- ✍ Why not? Was God somehow **unfaithful** to his promises, did he **abandon** his Chosen People, couldn't he have **changed their hearts**?

You see, Jesus was sent as the Messiah – the Savior of Israel. His mission was to bring salvation to the Jews. He worked at this mission all of His life, but, and this is the mystery St. Paul is struggling with, why did the Jews reject Him? Why did they turn away from Him?

Today's Gospel passage is odd (to say the least).

- ✍ A Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David – my daughter is tormented by a demon."
- ✍ And Jesus is silent!
- ✍ She persists. Jesus' disciples ask Him to "send her away...she keeps calling out after us."
- ✍ And Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Here is the explanation of Jesus' mission – to fulfill all the prophecies of the Old Covenant – to bring salvation and redemption to the Chosen People of Israel.

- ✍ But the woman **persists!** “Lord, help me!”
- ✍ Then, the strangest line of all: “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”
- ✍ But Lord, “even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.”
- ✍ And at that, Jesus “gives in” and says, “Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’
- ✍ And the woman’s daughter was healed from that hour.”

How polite is that? To call the woman a “dog.” Yet, she seems to recognize this. It’s as if she is saying, “Yes, Lord – I know that the gentiles (those not part of the Chosen People of Israel) are dogs – we worship idols and turn away from the True God.” But the children (Israel) reject you! You came to save THEM, but they turn away from you. So, what they rejected, give to those who ask for it.

It seems that here, in this moment, the larger will of God is manifested – Jesus comes not ONLY for the Jews, but for all who accept Him and come to Him with great faith. This is absolutely revolutionary! In Old Testament times, salvation from sin, both original and personal, had been reserved **only to the Jews**, only to the **Chosen People**. But now, with the coming of Jesus, **all people**, all the Gentile nations are now invited to hope for **eternal life** in the household of God, the “house of prayer for all peoples” as Isaiah had prophesied in today’s 1st reading.

And thus St. Paul’s point today: the Jews’ rejection of Christ has opened salvation to ALL, and revealed God’s desire to “have mercy upon all” and give life and salvation to all who come to Him.

ILLUSTRATION: The Saturday Morning Visitor...

It’s Saturday morning and your family has slept in and just settled down at the kitchen table for pancakes. There’s a knock at the door. You go to see who it is and you are greeted by, "Hello, I'm sister Dorothy and this is my son Jason. We've been saved by the blood of Christ. Are you saved? May we come in and talk to you about being saved?"

OH NO!!!! Immediately, almost every Roman Catholic becomes uncomfortable and isn’t sure what to do. While we want to be polite and respect the “sister Dorothy’s” goodwill and obvious faith, we are very hesitant to say, "Come in!" There are several reasons for this hesitancy. We realize our visitors will be talking to us about salvation and testing our knowledge of our Catholic Faith – so you better study it and know it!

These Saturday morning visitors scare us – because we don’t know what to say (a little study and fix that!). But they also impress us (or at least they do me) – that someone would be SO

convinced of their Faith and so in love with the Lord that they want to **share** that faith with complete strangers by knocking on their door and asking to talk to them about “being saved.” But this is actually the responsibility of **EVERY** Christian, not just of the Mormons or other groups.

APPLICATION: Taking the Christian’s Life-Mission Seriously

The fact that God **wills everyone’s salvation** is the source of our **life-mission** as Christians. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “At **every** time and in **every** place, God draws close to [us]” (CCC 1).

In other words, God’s Providence is **always at work** trying to draw each person into friendship with God, or to deepen that friendship where it already exists.

One of the most important ways God does that is through inviting us to be **partners with His Providence**, to **take part** in this saving mission – to make our desire, God’s desire: that all people be saved.

When our friends are in need, we respond. When they need help with a project, we help them. Just like this, a **mature** Christian, because he loves Christ and is living the life of grace, accepts God’s invitation to **work with Him in building up Christ’s Kingdom** by helping others **discover and experience** the Gospel: starting with our own family members, our friends and our co-workers.

Not that we have to become “sister Dorothy” going door to door with her son on Saturday morning, but this really is our **most important** work, it should be our greatest desire and our **life-mission**, because as Christians, friendship with Christ is our **most important** relationship.

Unfortunately, because the results of this activity – telling others about Christ, trying to build up the Church and Christianize our culture – are not easy or comfortable, we tend to leave that to other people and put it on the “back burner.”

Today, Jesus is asking us to put that activity on the **front burner** and to **turn up the heat**. Many of our neighbors are in **desperate need** of the mercy, truth and grace of God – just like the daughter of the Canaanite woman in today’s Gospel.

Our job is to bring needy souls to Christ – just like the Canaanite woman. We do that

- ✍ through our prayers;
- ✍ through our example of Christian living;
- ✍ and through our concrete actions of love.

But first, **we** have to reconnect **ourselves** to Christ – and that’s what our weekly sharing in the Eucharist does – it fills us once again with God’s life – His very Body and Blood – to help us fulfill our mission – to participate in Jesus’ mission – to bring God’s salvation to every person.

Let's reconnect with Christ **ourselves** so that we don't reject Him and His teachings (as many of the Jews did), but let's turn to God sure of His love for us – and His desire that we have salvation – all we need to do is accept that offer and live our lives for Him, not for ourselves.

Today, let's **pray from our hearts** during the rest of this Mass, and ask God to give us the “great faith” of the Canaanite woman, to give us courage and a renewed awareness of our life-mission – to bring God's salvation, not just to the “chosen people,” but to the ends of the earth.