

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: It is possible for some to not be saved?

I struggle, like St. Paul, with the question: If God wills everyone to be saved, **will** everyone be saved? If God truly **wants everyone to be saved** and is working hard to make that happen, how do we explain the **existence of Hell**, which is a dogma of our faith?

It's simple, though tragic. God **wants** all of us to be saved, but he won't **force** us to be saved. To **force** us would be to **destroy** us, because it would mean **taking away our freedom**, without which we would no longer be **human**.

Just as some of the **angels** rebelled against God, using their God-given freedom to **separate themselves** from God's friendship and **set up** their own **false** ideas of right and wrong, so human beings are capable of doing the same thing.

- ☞ The **fallen angels**, Satan and his demons, **rejected** God's offer of fellowship.
- ☞ Now they still **exist**, but they are **permanently cut off** from God's love and truth.
- ☞ That **state of existence** is what is called Hell.
- ☞ Human beings were **also** given the gift of **free will**.

- ✍ By that gift we can either **choose to obey** the laws of **God's household** and thereby enjoy the **glory of his friendship**.
- ✍ Or we can **give in** to the devil's **lies** and follow in his footsteps - as **concentration camps** like Auschwitz prove.

God gave each of us the gift of free will. The Jews were free to accept Christ – or to reject Him – and this was the mystery St. Paul is struggling with. The key to answering the question, “Will all be saved” is the gift of free will. Free will is nothing unless we really CAN choose.

What good is it if, on your 16th birthday, you get a blank check and you are told – go out and buy any car you want! Excitedly, you go to the car dealer, only to discover that the ONLY car you can buy is an old, run down 1970 VW bug? Hey! I thought I could choose any car I wanted – but I have only one to choose from! That’s not free will!

What good is it if God gave us free will, but we have no ability to exercise it – if EVERYONE is just admitted to heaven? We are not puppets, with God pulling the strings to ensure that everyone accepts Him, that everyone is saved. Oh, he WANTS everyone to be saved, but for there to really be free will – there must be the option of choosing AGAINST Christ – and thus the existence of Hell.

I love what the theologian Hans Urs VonBalthazar said when asked if there are people in hell. “We must believe that hell exists” he said. “Are there people there? I really hope not – but I fear that some people have so rejected God – that they ARE in hell.”

For our actions and decisions, there are consequences. I remember, as a boy, I had a cap gun. (I don’t think you’re allowed to have them anymore – they’re too “violent.”) I had run out of caps for it and while at the *Giant* with mom, we passed them. “Mom, can we get some more caps for my gun?” “No, son.” Well, I didn’t like that answer, so I took them anyway. Later in the day, as I was playing with my new caps in the gun – mom came out. “Where did you get those caps?” “At the *Giant*.” “I told you that you couldn’t have them” and off we went BACK to the *Giant* with my piggy-bank – to pay for the caps I had stolen. There was a consequence for my rejection of my mom’s wishes.

It’s the same with God. He DESIRES that we all accept Him, that we all accept the rules and laws He has set down for us – rules & laws which are not mean to annoy us and make us miserable – but to help us to CHOOSE salvation. But, for some mysterious reason, some of us REJECT Christ’s way – and instead choose our own.

APPLICATION: Avoiding Spiritual Dead Ends

In a sense, we could say that God has a **one-track mind**: whatever he **asks** of us and whatever he **permits** to happen in our lives, it all has **one and the same purpose**: to lead us to **Christian wisdom** and **maturity**.

- ✍ When he teaches us, through the trustworthy Magisterium of his Church, that **abortion is always wrong** because it directly kills an innocent human life;
- ✍ When he teaches us that **artificial contraception poisons** the relationship between husband and wife because it **separates** the two meanings [unitive and procreative, or unifying and life-giving] that he himself **built into** sexual intercourse;
- ✍ When he teaches us that the meaning of life is **not** to be found in **pleasure, possessions, or popularity**, and that each one of us has the **responsibility** to invest our **time, treasure, and talents** in the good not just of ourselves but of our **neighbors**;
- ✍ When he teaches that we must set the Sabbath and other Holy Days aside as a day to worship Him – but we find we’re too “busy” and think that God will just understand.
- ✍ When he teaches us all these things, he is not just trying to **complicate our lives**.

No!

- ✍ Our Lord wills the salvation of all people.
- ✍ **His heart yearns** for us to experience life as he **meant** it to be lived.
- ✍ **That's** why he points out the **dead-end roads** of comfort and self-indulgence that our culture today decorates, praises, and makes look *so* inviting.

Jesus is reminding us today, by this miraculous cure of the demon-possessed girl that **his heart beats for us**. He demands **great things** of us because he **loves** us so greatly.

Does God WANT everyone to be saved? YES! WILL everyone be saved? ... I don't know. I **pray** they will be, but, (and this is one of my worst fears as a priest & pastor) I worry about people's salvation (although I'm not the judge) as I observe people and the way they live their lives –

- ✍ as I watch Catholics outright REJECT the Church's teaching on birth control or abortion or sex outside of marriage,
- ✍ as I see people who marry outside the Church knowing that, in God's eyes, they are still married to someone else,
- ✍ as I watch people leave the Catholic Church because the rules are “too hard” – and so they join the “free church” down the street.

God WANTS us ALL to be saved. But we're not puppets – it's not going to happen automatically – we have to CHOOSE to be saved, and that means being faithful to the Commandments, being obedient to what our mother, the Church, teaches and tells us – whether we like it or not.

Will everyone be saved? I don't know. Does God WANT us all to be saved? YES!!! Will I be saved? Quoting St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, “I work out my own salvation in fear and trembling.” Why did many of the Jewish people reject Jesus? Why do people continue to reject Christ by rejecting His Church and His commandments? It truly is a mystery what we have to struggle with.

As we continue this holy Mass, let's **renew our faith** in his love. Let's **ACCEPT** His offer of salvation by being faithful to His commands – so that we won't find ourselves like others who rejected Christ because they didn't understand or didn't like what they heard. Let's not use our free will to do “whatever we want” but let's use our free will to serve God and **accept** His offer of Salvation.