

20 August 2017 (20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Isaiah 56:1,6-7; Psalm 66(67):2-3,5-6,8; Romans 11:13-15,29-32; Matthew 15:21-28.

Woman, you have great faith!

Today we are given an interesting (rather strange) narrative from the gospel according to Matthew; Jesus who initially refuses to heal the daughter of a non-Jewish woman.

Speaking to a Jewish-Christian Church, Jesus in the gospel according to Matthew tells the disciples: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans" (Mt 10:5). Jesus gives first priority to his own people. In today's narrative he repeats the same teaching: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." This sounds like a very strange instruction; although we do need to remember that at the conclusion of this same gospel Jesus instructs his disciples to: "Go make disciples of all the gentiles" (Mt 28:19).

The unnamed woman that approached Jesus is a Canaanite, one of the peoples against the Jewish people. She approaches Jesus and recognises him as the promised messiah; she addresses him as Lord, Son of David! The use of these titles is already a sign of her faith. The title 'Son of David' is a messianic title; God promised King David that one of his descendants would be anointed saviour of Israel.

At first Jesus ignored the woman's request, he then snubbed her, comparing her to a house-dog begging for food that rightfully belonged to the members of the household. We do not fully understand Jesus' comments, especially because these comments are far removed from the love of neighbour that he often spoke about.

As a true woman of faith, she was not put off by Jesus' remarks. She instead went up to him, knelt at his feet and pointed out that it was acceptable for house-dogs to eat the scraps that fell off the table when children are eating!

The Canaanite woman gives us a strong image of prayer; even when it seems to us that we do not get what we are asking for, we need to continue begging until God listens to our prayers. Prayer needs to be based on a strong acceptance of God, understanding of who he is, and a strong faithfulness to the relationship.

It is a big temptation to stop praying because 'nothing happens in prayer,' or 'I do not feel like praying,' or even 'I do not know how or what to pray.' Prayer is not meant to make us feel good or happy, but it is the basis of our relationship with God.

If we were journeying with an elderly parent, I am sure that we would do our best to visit our parent as often as we could. Often this can become a boring, painful and stressful experience, but we would still go, not because we felt good or excited about going, but because we loved and respected our parent. Very often we would visit our parent and end up talking about the weather, politics or about nothing at all, perhaps even just sitting next to each other watching TV. The visits may not be nourishing, but we know that they are important.

At the basis of our commitment towards our parent there is a relationship that started when we were young children. At the basis of our prayer we need to have a relationship with God. The Canaanite woman felt that she had this relationship with Jesus; she recognised him as Lord and Son of David and when rebuffed, she had the courage to speak out and challenge his comments.

The mature Christian, the disciple of Jesus, develops this deep relationship and is not afraid to sit in silence with the God she or he loves.

Let us learn from the Canaanite woman to be faithful in our relationship with God.

Fr Mario