

20th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2020

Isaiah 56:1,6-7 Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 Matthew 15: 21-28

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

Dear sisters and brothers, the woman in the Gospel this weekend was not Jewish. In fact, Matthew uses the old-fashioned word “Canaanite” to emphasize that point. This is a profound, powerful, magnificent, heroic, multi-generational, world-wide mission of the Church. Jesus is speaking to the woman but teaching the disciples and us.

Now, the Canaanite woman comes forward. The Jewish people, and the disciples of course, believed that they had an exclusive lock on God’s love and care and grace. The Canaanite woman is a great example of faith. We have this on the authority of Jesus himself: “Woman, you have great faith.” We are familiar with the expression ‘tough love.’ Well, that woman possessed what we might call ‘tough faith’.

First of all she humbled herself to ask a favour from a Jew. Then she refused to give up when her request wasn’t granted at once. At first Jesus refused to answer her. Then he announced that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. (She was Gentile.) Even when the Apostles tried to get rid of her, she persisted. In this belief conversation, Jesus gives this woman a chance to show the disciples her strong and persistent faith. So great was her faith in Jesus that she went on pleading. Finally Jesus granted her request. Then he grants her request and the child is healed. In this gesture, the disciples get a preview of their mission not only to the Jewish people but to the world. Jesus was speaking to the woman but teaching the Apostles that their mission is beyond the borders of Palestine and showing them the great capacity for faith that exist among all peoples.

This nameless Gentile woman is an example of that tough faith we all need times. But she is also a great example of love. Jesus could just as well have said to her: “Woman, you have great love.” We see the depth of her love in the trouble she went to on behalf of her daughter. She had no thought of the cost to herself. Hers was not only a tough faith, but also a faith that expressed itself in love. There is an essential link between faith and love. St. Paul says that we could have faith strong enough to move mountains, but if we are without love, it will be of no benefit to us (2 Cr 13:2). Love is the great power in the world. It’s amazing what people can do and will do when motivated by love. This is especially true of a mother. A mother will do anything, and endure anything, for sake of her child. A mother does not give up easily. She never gives up. A mother’s love is probably the most reliable human love most of us will ever know. No wonder the Bible uses a mother’s love as an image of God’s love for us, “*Can a mother forget the child at her breast, or fail to cherish the child of her womb? Yet even if a mother should forget, I will never forget you,*” says the Lord (Is 49:15). Isaiah is telling us that God’s love for us is even more reliable than a mother’s love for her child. It is on this love – God’s love for us – that our faith is based.

Dear sisters and brothers, the early Church faced a similar problem with regard to the Gentiles. Matthew sees Jesus as having broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile. Even though his own mission was restricted to Israel, Jesus did reach out to individual Gentiles such as the centurion

(Mt 8:5-13) and the Canaanite woman. Hence, after the resurrection of Jesus, the early Church extended its mission to the Gentiles.

The story in this Gospel this weekend resembles that of the healing of the centurion's servant in the showing us the great faith of a Gentile. Though a member of a tribe that had been ancestral enemies of the Jews, she had more faith in Jesus than his own people. They wouldn't believe in Him unless they saw signs and wonders. Indeed, they saw signs and wonders, and still refused to believe. This nameless pagan woman has remained an exemplar of faith for 2,000 years. The Church is universal in its reach. That is the truth uniting the reading today. The Lord says through Isaiah, *"my house shall be a house of prayer for all people."*

As St. Paul writes to the Romans in the second reading about the plan of God, he is struggling with the dilemma of why the Jewish people at that time rejected Christ. He writes that they had the election, the prophets, the covenant and the promise. Then St. Paul realized God's purpose behind the Jewish rejection of Jesus was to direct the Church to go to the Gentiles. Redemption was for everyone. Now, in this moment from today's Gospel, Jesus shows the Apostles the faith that even Gentiles can have. It is a belief glimpse of the huge harvest that awaits them.

This reminds us that we are a missionary Church not only to different parts of the world but also to the people around us. There is a deep yearning for God within every person and we can bring an answer to that yearning. It is true that we have to take people as they are, but we don't have to leave them that way. Jesus never did. So often we feel that because we can't evangelize everybody, therefore that justifies evangelizing nobody. Or because we can't meet a person's every need, we don't have to meet any need. Because we can't share all of Catholic truth with someone, therefore we share none of it.

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 and 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 go to places where priests don'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 many will ever know. Do we take the significance of that fact seriously? Each of us is here not because we a a vision or a visit from an angel, but because some human being cared enough to share the faith with us. Are we willing to do the same? Do we ever share our faith or invite one person to Church and to prayer?

We have to take people as they are, but we don't have to leave them that way. The Lord calls each of us not only to embrace the Gospel in our life but to give a piece 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.

Dear sisters and brothers, the Canaanite woman in this weekend's Gospel enjoyed no status in the eyes of the Jewish people of her time. She was someone to be scorned and ignored. Yet, in her deep love for her daughter and her great faith, she is a model of the true disciple of Jesus. She reminds us that what identifies us as Christians most fundamentally is our faith, our hope and our love. Amen.

Fr Tao Pham