

Homily Notes for Sunday, August 20, 2017, 20th in Ordinary A

Being persistent in prayer as we extend the community of the faithful into the peripheries.

Readings: Isaiah 56:1,6-7, Ps 67:2-3, 5,6 8, Rom 11:13-15, 29-32, Matthew 15:21-28.

Introductory question: As we are progressing in our work with the “V Encuentro” we are being challenged “to reach out to the “peripheries”? This is the language and desire of Pope Francis. Jesus didn’t reach out. The Canaanite woman reached out to him. How can we be open to those outside our “comfort zone” and help bring Jesus to them? Our readings today challenge us to do this.

1. Summary: While the Church is a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9), we are also called to share the Gospel to the “uttermost ends of the earth” and to help people of every culture and background to be saved through faith. Today’s readings illustrate the responsibility to the rest of the world, to those who may not be like us, and the key to this, persistence in prayer.

2. The first reading: The third part of the book of the prophet Isaiah (chapters 56-66, 1st part ch 1-39, 2nd part ch 40-55), was written mainly for the Jews who were returning from the Babylonian exile to join their relatives who had been left behind in Judea. It shows a new emphasis upon Temple, worship, Sabbath, fasting, and Law. The Temple is probably rebuilt (therefore, after 515 B.C.) but the energetic reformers, Malachi, Nehemiah, and Ezra, have not strengthened the weak spirits and still weaker morals of the Jewish inhabitants.

3. The problem was one of maintaining appropriate and necessary holiness and distinctiveness while living among pagans. Note that there was a conflict between the outreach of Isaiah and the isolationist attitude of the scribes. “*The foreigners,*” Isaiah proclaimed, “*who join themselves to Yahweh, ministering to Him, loving the name of Yahweh and becoming His servants . . . them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*” This means that those who wish to participate in the blessings of God need to convert, to convert to following Jesus Christ and the New Covenant.

4. In Isaiah’s situation, thus Isaiah consoled those Jews who had married Gentiles by assuring them that their God was equally interested in the people of other nations and in the descendants of Abraham. Hence, the exclusivist claims of the Jews as God’s chosen people would have to yield as God made room for others. For, besides the exiles of Israel, Yahweh would receive the non-Israelites who had joined themselves to the Lord. See Gen 12:3 “All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.” This may have been in conflict with Ezra’s denunciation of mixed marriages (Ezra 9-10).

5, The Psalmist sings of God’s blessing on the people of Israel and therefore calls on all nations and peoples to praise God. The Psalm is a response to Yahweh’s declaration in the first reading that the Gentiles will be accepted at the altar of Yahweh. This anticipates St. Paul’s mission to the Gentiles and the expansion of the plan of God to extend to all the peoples of the earth.

6. Second Reading: In Romans 9–11, Paul asked how God could apparently go back on the promise to Abraham that Abraham's descendants would always be God's chosen people, now that those descendants had rejected Jesus. Paul answered that it had been God's plan all along to allow the Jews to reject Jesus, so that the few Jews who accepted Jesus, like Paul himself, would be forced to turn to the Gentiles and bring them into the covenant. Frustrated by the slow pace of Jewish conversions, Paul devoted his preaching mission to the Gentiles, so that the Jews would become jealous and accept Jesus. Thus, God’s secret plan to invite all people into the covenant would be revealed and completed. Paul's failure to convert many of his fellow-Jews serves as a model for us who must accept failure in our lives, especially when it concerns our loved ones who refuse what we judge to be to their advantage. Paul’s message is also a challenge to us to pray fervently and often for the conversion of the Jews.

7. Gospel: The significance of the miracle: The gospels describe only two miraculous healings Jesus performed for Gentiles: the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman and the healing of the

centurion's servant (Mt. 8: 10-12). The encounter with the Canaanite woman was the only occasion on which Jesus was ever outside Jewish territory. These miracles were performed in Tyre and Sidon, two coastal cities, twenty-five and fifty miles north of Galilee in present-day Lebanon. The story of our miracle is told by Mark (7:24-30) as well as by Matthew (15:21-23). These miracles foreshadow the extension of the Gospel, the Good News, to the whole world. The woman in the first miracle belonged to the old Canaanite stock of the Syro-Phoenician race. The Canaanites were the ancestral enemies of the Jews and were regarded as pagans and idolaters and, hence, as ritually unclean. But this woman showed:

“a gallant and an audacious love which grew until it worshipped at the feet of the divine, an indomitable persistence springing from an unconquerable hope, a cheerfulness which would not be dismayed.”

By granting the persistent request of the pagan woman, Jesus demonstrates that his mission did include removing the walls of division and prejudice between the Jews and the Gentiles. God will welcome all who believe in Him, who asks for His mercy and try to do His will.

8. Faithful persistence rewarded. Jesus first ignores both the persistent cry of the woman and the impatience of his disciples to send the woman away. He then tries to awaken true faith in the heart of this woman by an indirect refusal, telling her, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* But the woman is persistent in her request. She *kneels* before him and *begs*, *“Lord, help me.”* Now Jesus makes a seemingly harsh statement, *“It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”* The term *“dogs”* was a derogatory Jewish word for the Gentiles. Dogs were regarded by the Jews as unclean, because they would eat anything given to them, including pork. The woman noticed, however, that Jesus had used the word *kunariois*--the word for household pets – rather than the ordinary Greek word for dogs - *kuon*. She also observed that Jesus had used the word for dogs in a joking way – a sort of test of the woman's faith. So she immediately matched wits with Jesus. Her argument runs like this: Pets are not outsiders but insiders. They not only belong to the family, but are part of the family. While they do not have a seat at the table, they enjoy intimacy at the family's feet. Hence the woman replied: *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table”* (v. 27), expressing her faith that Jesus could and would heal her daughter. Jesus was completely won over by the depth of her faith, her confidence and her wit and hence responded exuberantly, *“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”* We notice that the woman was refused three times by Jesus before he granted her request and finally, the fourth time, her persistence was rewarded and her plea was answered. This Gospel episode is an account of a woman who got more from the Kingdom of God than she hoped for. The woman came to Jesus asking for one miracle and she got two. This is really a double miracle, for the daughter was exorcised of her demonic possession and received a new life, and the mother, through her experience with Christ, found a new life as well. The greatness of this woman's faith consists in:

- a) Her willingness to cross the barriers of race, and culture;
- b) Her refusal to be put off or ignored because of her position in life and
- c) Her humility in admitting that she did not deserve the Master's attention and time.

See Nehemiah 13 and Ezra 9-10.

9. Life Application: Three aspects:

- 1) In order to be welcoming to others, how does God want us to change ourselves to be that better-version-of-ourselves that he wants?
- 2) How do we need to improve in persistence and prayer to become closer to what God wants?
- 3) Where beyond ourselves, beyond our comfort zone, does God want us to go?

For example: At our after-Mass meals, would you forego eating and visiting with your friends or just going home in order to stay and welcome newcomers or those you do not know?

For example: How do you think God wants you to develop your prayer life this year? The next step?

For example: in your marriage or in your relationships, what might require persistence in prayer?

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