**20th Sunday of Ordinary Time - Cycle A**

Is 56: 1, 6-7; Rom 11: 13-15, 29-32; Mt 15: 21-28

August 13/14, 2011

**Psalm 54**

God, by your name, save me

By your power, give me justice.

God, listen to my prayer.

Give ear to the words of my mouth.

Behold! God is my help.

The Lord sustains me.

With my entire heart, I offer you worship.

Lord, I will praise your name for it is good.

From all anguish you have freed me.

My eyes have seen the defeat of my foes.

I start today with this excerpt from Psalm 54, because it expresses, in the form of a prayer, the heart and the pleading of the Canaanite woman in today’s Gospel.

It also is at the heart of what the prophet Isaiah said in the first reading:

***“All people who come before the Lord, love his name and become his servants will be brought to God’s holy mountain (his presence) and what they offer him will be acceptable.”***

The woman in today’s Gospel fulfilled in a small way Isaiah’s prophecy for she came before the Lord, she came to believe in him, she honored his name, she worshipped in his presence and she was accepted by Jesus.

This is a remarkable story. Here we have a Canaanite woman approaching Jesus. She has two strikes against her: One, she was a woman in a culture and time where men did not directly speak to women unless they were their husbands, and two, she was a Canaanite. Canaanites were a sinful race of people who were to be exterminated if you read the Old Testament accounts. They were considered wicked and godless. They sacrificed their own children to their gods. So, here is a woman from this pagan race who approaches Jesus, calling him “Son of David,” a title only the Israelites would use meaning the Messiah, and she does him homage, she worships him. She does not want to sacrifice her child to a god; she wants to save her daughter, and in doing so this Canaanite woman develops her faith in the one true God and hopes in his mercy.

Jesus’ disciples of course are just trying to get rid of her they wanted to set some distance between them and her; they want Jesus to “dismiss” her by quickly giving her what she wants without speaking to her so as to shut her up…. In effect, they wanted Jesus to ignore her. But Jesus waits. He doesn’t dismiss her. He gives the woman time to develop her faith and her response to him. This encounter between the woman and Jesus is not about healing the daughter; it is a story of the woman’s **faith.** It is a story of God’s **mercy**.

Jesus doesn’t respond to her right away. In fact, when he does he says, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* Later he adds, *“It is not right to take the food of children and toss it to dogs!”* To our ears, this seems awfully harsh and mean, but Jesus is bluntly pointing out how far this woman’s people, the Canaanites, had been living from God. And he is saying that it was God’s plan that the Messiah be sent to God’s chosen people, the Jews, in order to turn their hearts and their lives back to God, and then they in turn would go forth as a renewed people to ***bring all the nations*** to God. But many of the chosen people would refused God’s plan, (although not all) and because of this, the mission of bringing the world to God would fall to the Gentiles, as St. Paul tells us in the second reading today.

No, Jesus doesn’t respond to the woman until she fulfills what Isaiah had prophesied would happen: that the Gentiles would come before God and believe; they would love his name (Son of David) and worship him; they would be given mercy and their worship would be acceptable to him. Jesus gives the woman a chance to develop her faith, to express her hope and to show her love before the people who were looking at her that day. Jesus in turn then showed to all those standing by that God can and does show mercy to all and not just the chosen few***.***

We really cannot imagine how radical of an idea that was to the Jewish people at that time. It was only to Israel, only to the Jews, that God had made the covenant; only the Jews had God’s law; only the Jews were the “chosen ones.” Yet here, Jesus makes clear that God’s mercy will be extended to all of us, not just a chosen few.

Jesus didn’t deny the truth that his people, Israel, were God’s chosen people. He never said it made no matter whether the woman followed God’s law or not. He didn’t say there was no difference between the Jewish faith and the Canaanite religion so the woman could believe whatever she wished. No, he was brutally honest in saying that God’s people were the chosen ones of Israel, who had been gifted with his Law, his Presence, his Covenant, and that ***is was from the Chosen People*** ***of Israel that salvation would come to all of us.***

No, Jesus spoke the Truth, as difficult or harsh as it may have sounded, for it is always the truth which frees us as it freed this Canaanite woman and brought healing to her life.

**But** Jesus also demonstrated another truth: that God is never bound or limited and he can and will extend his mercy to whomever he wills, especially to those who come to him in whatever way they are able to do so with faith and hope and love. Think of the repentant thief, Dismas. We don’t know, but most probably he was not one of the chosen ones of Israel, he was a Gentile, yet he received mercy and salvation. Jesus is clearly saying that everyone can be saved by his mercy which he extends to all.

Salvation is found only in the Catholic Church, my friends. That is a doctrine of our faith. The Church is the Body of Christ and it is from Jesus Christ alone that salvation and reconciliation comes into the world. That is the truth. Yet we know from the Second Vatican Council that even those outside of the formal structure of the Church can and often do partially share in the truth and grace needed for salvation, which flows from the sacramental life of the Catholic Church, and in that way are saved by God’s mercy.

St. Paul told us today in the second reading that: ***“God has delivered all to disobedience so that He might be merciful to all.”***

There is not one of us here today who has not sinned.

There is not one of us here today who has not received God’s mercy!

There is not one of us here today who is not loved by God.

***Those with whom we find it hardest to live, to like, those who may seem most unlike us, are the very ones to whom God shows his most magnificent work: his mercy.***

Let us not ignore or condemn those unlike us.

Let us not “dismiss” them too quickly.

Let us not only recognize their sins and shortcomings.

Let us not be quick to set distance between “them” and “us.”

Let us look for their faith; let us look at their desire for healing; let us look for their desire to be reconciled with us; let us look for their desire to return home.

Regardless of our circumstances, regardless of how far we may have walked away from God and the Church, we can receive God’s love and mercy. God calls us back to himself. God calls us into his presence, to his holy mountain. He loves us. He invites us to be with him forever.