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The Twentieth Sunday of the Year (A)

It seems that most everywhere you turn these days it is said, "Jesus would not turn anyone away." Others will say something similar: "I don't think Jesus would care about x, y or z." These are the people who present Jesus not as he is, but as they imagine and want him to be. They present him as nothing more than a nice guy, as one teacher among many, as one who makes no demands of his followers.

The words of Jesus which we have heard today stand in stark contradiction to what many say Jesus is like. This passage is a constant reminder to us that - to quote Saint Jerome - "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."

In his encounter with this Canaanite woman, Jesus certainly does not appear to be a nice guy; in point of fact, he comes across as being rather harsh. Why does he say what he does?

The woman to whom he at last speaks is a Canaanite woman. She is a descendant of Gentiles, a Gentile herself, one who does not worship the God of Israel. Even so, she must have been attracted to the faith of Israel, to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for she recognized Jesus as the "Son of David" (Matthew 15:22). She saw the truth of Jesus where so many others should have recognized him as such but did not.

Her faith led her to cry out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon" (Matthew 15:22). What was the Lord's response to her petition? It looked as though he ignored her cry and kept walking. Why? We shall see in a moment.

Though seemingly ignored by Jesus, this woman did not give up. She kept following him, crying out all the while. If she were silent the disciples would not have said to Jesus, "Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us" (Matthew 15:23).

But Jesus did not send her away; rather, he said to the disciples, to the crowds, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). She is not of the house of Israel and does not therefore fall within the context of his ministry.

Does this mean, then, that Jesus did not come to save all mankind? Of course not! He came to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, to those bound by the Law but who lost sight of the purpose of the Law. He certainly desired that his gospel, the gift of redemption and salvation, should be extended also to the Gentiles, but this was to be done not by him but by his Church, founded upon the rock of Peter (cf. Matthew 16:18).

If we were met with this response of Jesus, I daresay we would have given up and left. Yet this woman does not give up;

she perseveres in her faith and says to him, simply and humbly, "Lord, help me" (Matthew 15:25).

At these words of pure faith the Lord Jesus said directly to her, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:26). The children of whom Jesus speaks are the Jews, those to whom he has been sent; the dogs are the Gentiles, those who do not know the God of Israel.

This great woman of faith does not object or refute Jesus' insult; she accepts it and acknowledges it as true, saying to him, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters" (Matthew 15:27).

She saw that the lost sheep did not accept Jesus, that they did not recognize him as the Messiah and Lord, and she asked to be given the gift they refused. What boldness of faith! At this, Jesus exclaimed, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" (Matthew 15:28).

Why does Jesus make her go through so much? Consider her embarrassment and the ridicule that must have been directed at her. She willingly humiliated herself in front of the crowds simply to beg Jesus to listen to her plea. Why did he not answer her request the first time?

Jesus waited so that the depth of the woman's faith might be revealed to her, that she might hear from him, "great is your faith!" He has seen the "lack of faith" in his family at

Nazareth (Matthew 13:58); he has seen the "little faith" of the disciples (Matthew 14:31); now he finds a woman of "great faith."

It is in this act, in answering the prayer of this Gentile woman, that the Lord brings forth his salvation and reveals his justice (cf. Isaiah 56:1). The promise made through the prophet Isaiah is fulfilled:

The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, ministering to him, loving the name of the LORD, and becoming his servants - all who keep the Sabbath free from profanation and hold to my covenant, them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer (Isaiah 56:).

This woman's faith, then, becomes for us a measuring rod, a litmus test, as it were, for our own faith, for our perseverance and our trust in the Lord's merciful love.

Let us briefly examine this woman's prayer. She comes to the Lord not seeking a favor for herself, but for her daughter. "My daughter is tormented by a demon," she says. It is her love for her daughter - not for herself - that brings her to Jesus, that leads her to beg, "Lord, help me."

When it seems that the Lord has turned a deaf ear to our prayer we must consider the example of this woman of faith. Have we persevered in our petition, or have we simply given up? Is our petition a selfish one, or one of authentic love, one that seeks the good of another?

This Canaanite woman knew that we must be bold in our prayer, that we must hold fast to the words of the Savior: "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith you will receive it" (Matthew 21:22).

Let us ask the Lord to give us the grace of perseverance in prayer that following after this Canaanite woman, our faith, too, may increase.

Let each of us, with this woman, boldly raise our prayers to the Lord, begging always for the good of others. Amen.