

Homily for 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2011

It has been tragic that St Paul's words in his letter to the Romans (Romans 11:13-15, 29-32) have not been given more serious attention. Last week and this week we hear of his agonising over the situation of his fellow Jews. Far from thinking of them as condemned for their rejection of Jesus as Messiah, he is at pains to make clear that "God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice." Jesus is God's greatest gift to the Jews. If the Church had paid more attention to him then centuries old anti-Semitism and the Holocaust might have been avoided. After all, as we heard last week, Jesus was their flesh and blood, a faithful Jew till his death.

We always have difficulty both in the Church and in society in general deciding who is to be included and who excluded. The refugee problem is but one example. We have all kinds of regulations in the Church about who can be baptised and so on. There is always the tension between maintaining the identity of a group or Church and at the same time recognising the universality of God's invitation. That tension is an undercurrent in all the readings of this Sunday.

Jesus had just been in conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees because Jesus disciples had broken the tradition of their ancestors by not washing their hands before eating. He responds by saying that they are hypocrites who neglect the law of God for the sake of their human traditions. They are blind guides. Because of this, Jesus seems to lose heart and leaves Palestine, the house of Israel, to go into pagan territory. This was the land of the Canaanites around Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast, the ancient enemies of Israel. These people worshipped a multitude of gods and were even suspected of child sacrifice. So it was common enough for Jews to refer to them as "dogs".

So when this Canaanite woman comes to Jesus calling him "Son of David" and "Lord", titles only Jews would use he is put in an awkward place. Is she using him for her own ends? Very un-Jesus like Jesus ignores her request completely. It is the disciples who want him to do something. Send her away, they say. He tells the disciples his mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel. At this point he sees his mission in a pretty exclusive way. She, hearing this comes and kneels before him and says simply "Lord, help me." His reply is very harsh by any standard. It has caused much debate over the centuries. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Then her quick witted response seems to change everything. Still addressing Jesus as Lord, she says "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Some have said that Jesus is simply testing her by his remarks. We do not hear his tone of voice or see his body language. So we do not know. But, if so, it is a very cruel joke on his part. More likely we have an example of the ever deepening understanding by Jesus of the extent of the mission to which he is called. The barbaric martyrdom of his cousin, John the Baptist and his own rejection by the leaders makes clear to him that how he had been seeing his mission so far was not the whole story. He recognises the woman's wit and wisdom and faith. You can almost see him smiling at her.

Because here he finds a pagan woman with faith in him as Lord. Unlike Peter's "little faith" as he tried to walk to Jesus on the water last week, of this woman he says "great is your faith". It is as though there is a great rejoicing going on here and a great liberation. It is a liberation for her and for him. His message he now realises is no longer confined to one group but to all and the pagan woman's daughter is cured. God's house "will be called a house of prayer for all peoples" Isaiah tells in the first reading. Jesus returns to Galilee with great confidence to continue his work.

The Church has to listen to the cries of people everywhere unafraid if they seem foreign or pagan to respond to them. God does not hear us because we are the chosen people or the Church. Rather we are the Church because God has heard our cry for help.

Fr Graham