

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time A - Do not exclude the foreigners! We Christians build bridges not walls

August 16, 2020.

Often in the Scriptures, there is the tension of who belongs and who does not. Jesus stood in the midst of this tension all of his public life. Israel jealously protected its sanctity as God's holy people with invisible walls to exclude "foreigners." Throughout human history, walls were built to exclude like the Berlin Wall in Germany, the Border Wall between US and Mexico. But Pope Francis encourages us Christians to do otherwise, "**build bridges.**"

Jesus and his disciples in this Sunday's Gospel (Matthew 15:21-28) look quite guilty of prejudice and selective charity, like building a wall: Jesus refuses to hear a woman because she is a foreigner and in his metaphor, one of the "dogs." *OUCH.* We all know the story. The Canaanite woman cries out for help and Jesus at first will not even talk to her. The disciples demand that he send her away because she is a trouble-maker, and he seems to agree with them. "**I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,**" he says. Finally the poor Canaanite woman walks right up, does "homage" to Jesus saying, "**Lord, help me.**" Jesus would never ignore such words, at least so we Christians believe. Nor should we ever be deaf to words like this in our own daily lives. However, he says to her, "**It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.**" *OUCH.* This is the line that is so hard for us to understand. So un-Jesus-like.

What's happening? These are the clues. She first called out to him with the words "**Son of David.**" acknowledging, like the Jews, that he is the Messiah. She is a Canaanite, and they do not believe in any Messiah-to-come, especially not one that would descend from David. Then she calls him "**Lord.**" In Matthew's Gospel this is an explicit admission that Jesus and God are one. This is proof that she believed in him as the Savior. Surely he sensed this. But Israelites and Canaanites had long been in strife. How could "they" with their strange gods produce a woman who believes in the one God and in Jesus as the Christ? Is it possible that Jesus was drawing her out, teasing her in order to strengthen her belief and also teach the disciples a lesson? The woman's quick wit provides a wonderful, humble, bantering response that wins the day. "**Even dogs eat scraps that fall from their master's table.**" It is a clever counter-thrust, and Jesus loves it. She is saying, "**It does not matter what a person's status is as long as they believe. And I do believe.**" I'll bet Jesus smiled a great smile as he told her how great her faith was. And he gladly gave her what she asked; he cured her daughter.

As St Paul puts it in his First Letter to Timothy, God wants "**everyone to be saved and reach the full knowledge of the truth**" (1 Timothy 2:4). And in today's Second Reading (Romans 11:13-15, 29-32): "**For God delivered all to disobedience,**" [in other words, he permitted sin and evil to spread throughout the entire human family], that he might have mercy upon all. **This was one of the most revolutionary aspects of the Gospel.** In Old Testament times, salvation from sin, both original and personal, had been reserved only to the Jews, only to the one Chosen People. But the prophet Isaiah (56:1, 6-7) says, after forty years of exile returning to their holy land and especially their re-consecrated temple, there is now a new way of living faithfully the Covenant of the Lord. "**For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.**" The prophet is calling the people to embrace those who honour the one God, the Lord of the Covenant. If new comers from other religions observe the holy customs, especially the Sabbath, then God's justice will be revealed to all people. They are welcomed by God and are to be welcomed by God's people even into the holy Temple. **With the coming of Jesus, all peoples, all the Gentile nations are now invited to hope for eternal life in the household of God, the "house of prayer for all peoples" as Isaiah prophesied.**

We as baptized Christians, need to welcome "foreigners" and build bridges seriously. Providence of God is always at work trying to draw each person into his friendship, or deepen that friendship where it already exists. God invites us to be His partners, to take part in this saving mission. **We Christians should accept God's invitation to collaborate in building up Christ's Kingdom, in helping others discover and experience the Gospel, starting with family members, friends, and colleagues.** This is our most important work, our life-mission, because friendship with Christ is our most vital relationship. Unfortunately, because the results of this activity - telling others about Christ, trying to build up the Church and Christianizing culture - are not always seen as an immediate need, we tend to push this responsibility to the back burner. Today Jesus wants us to bring it to the front and turn up the heat.

There are many Christians who are willing to be friends with Jesus in good times. However, in bad times, Jesus has very few friends who are willing to embrace the cross. Of course, it is never easy to be a friend of the cross, but who wants to be a fair-weather fan of Jesus and his Gospel? Our Christian lives are a constant battle. We should never forget that. We are all tempted to escape from the reality of our situation from time to time. Nevertheless, whoever perseveres until the end will be saved and have a fruitful life. **We can't expect to have a glorious eternity full of celebration and joy if we don't shed some blood, sweat, and tears here on earth for the sake of Christ and the good of our brothers and sisters.**

Remember, many of our neighbours are in desperate need of the mercy, truth, and grace of God - just like the daughter of the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel. Our job is to connect those needy souls to Christ, through our prayers, through our concrete actions of Christian living. But first we have to reconnect ourselves to Christ - so **let's pray from the heart and ask God to give us courage and a renewed awareness of our true life-mission. Let's ask him to help us live the mission that the Father entrusts to us. Let's ask God to help us support those who are alone and to learn from Jesus' heart how to be patient and loving. Let's ask God to help us remove all the walls and build bridges connecting all peoples of the world.**