

20th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today's readings present a wonderfully universal perspective on God's offer of salvation. This is a perspective that is very dear to us as Catholic Christians. As you know 'Catholic' means universal. Jesus came to offer love to all and all are invited to belong to the family of his disciples. As Catholics we are committed to an understanding of Christianity that is meant for all, that is offered to all and that belongs to all who want it. 'Catholic' was a name given to Christians very early when it became obvious to outsiders that Christians belonged to all walks of life and welcomed people from all racial and religious groups. The earliest extant example of the word 'Catholic' being used of the Church is from the first years of the Second Century in a letter from Ignatius of Antioch to the community in Smyrna. He makes the simple statement: 'Wherever Christ is, there is the Catholic Church'(Ignatius to the Community in Smyrna 8).

The authors of the First Reading from the Isaiah scroll claim that God's temple is to be a house of prayer, not just for the Jews, but for 'all the nations'(Isaiah 56:7). They were opposing those within Judaism who were trying to restrict God's gifts including the temple to Jews. The Responsorial Psalm picks up the same theme. The psalmist prays that God's saving help will be experienced by 'all nations'. (Incidentally the Hebrew word for 'saving help' is yeshua' which is the name Mary and Joseph gave to their son. Jesus means 'The saving help of the Lord'.) Paul expresses the same longing when he prays that all nations will come to know the glory of God as it is revealed on the face [and we might add 'in the heart'] of Jesus (1Corinthians 4:6). The psalm goes on to pray that 'all the peoples will praise God', and that the 'ends of the earth will revere him'. In the Second Reading, Paul assures his readers that God wants to show mercy 'to all mankind'(Romans 11:32).

It is because we believe this that we hold so tenaciously to the name 'Catholic'. We know that the heart of God reaches out to all people, and so must the heart of a disciple of Jesus. Pope Paul VI expressed this well on the Feast of Pentecost 1966, when he announced the establishment of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians. I would like to quote the Pope at some length: 'To take away from the Church its qualification of 'catholic' would mean to change its face, the face Christ wants and loves; it would mean to go against the intention of God who wanted to make the Church the expression of his unbounded love for the whole of humankind. We should understand the psychological and moral implications of calling the Church 'Catholic' ... The human heart is small; it is self-centred; it has place only for oneself and for a few others of one's own family. And when, after long and arduous efforts, it opens up a little, we succeed in loving our own country and our own social class; but the human heart always seeks boundaries within which it limits itself and seeks refuge. Even today, the heart of modern man finds it hard to transcend this interior confinement. To the invitation of civil progress to widen its capacity for love of the world, it responds hesitantly and on the still self-centred condition that it be for its own advantage. Usefulness and prestige govern people's

hearts, not to speak of the drive to dominate others and to use them for our own purposes. But when the name 'catholic' becomes an interior reality, all egoism is overcome, all class struggle develops into full social solidarity, all nationalism is reconciled with the good of the world community, all racism is condemned, and all totalitarianism is unmasked in its inhumanity. The small heart has been broken open. It acquires a completely new capacity to expand ... A catholic heart means a heart with universal dimensions: a heart that has overcome the basic narrowness that prevents us listening to our calling towards supreme love. It means a magnanimous heart, an ecumenical heart, a heart capable of embracing the whole world. This does not make it a heart that is indifferent to the truth of things or to sincerity of words. It does not mistake goodness for weakness, nor does it confuse peace with cowardice or apathy. It lives the marvellous synthesis of St. Paul: 'Doing the truth in love'(Ephesians 4:15)'.

Paul VI learned something of this from his predecessor, John XXIII. Among Pope John's last words were: 'The secret of my ministry is in that crucifix you see opposite my bed. It's there so that I can see it in my first waking moment and before going to sleep. It's there, also, so that I can talk to it during the long hours of the night. Look at it. See it as I see it. Those open arms have been the programme of my pontificate: they say that Christ died for all, for all. No one is excluded from his love, from his forgiveness. What did Christ leave to his Church? He left us 'ut omnes unum sint' [that all may be one', John 10:16). ... My time on earth is drawing to a close. But Christ lives on and the Church continues his work. Souls, souls. Ut unum sint! ut unum sint!'

If, then, we experience the privilege of communion with Jesus here in our community, our catholic heart will be compelled to reach out to others who experience the same longing, but who do not know where to search. Each of us has to ask how we are to carry out this universal mission given us by Jesus. In seeking an answer to this very personal question, we will find help through the example of Jesus in today's Gospel.

A Canaanite woman comes to Jesus pleading for her daughter. No doubt Jesus' heart goes out to her as it always does to people in need. However, Jesus knows something that we all need to know. We are not called to meet any and every need that presents itself to us. It is not we who are the source of healing and love. God is love and the only true and therefore healing love we can give is the love which God inspires in us. We might feel better saying Yes, but it is important to discern first what God's will is for us. From the whole of the Gospel it is clear that Jesus' only desire was to do the will of God his Father. From Jesus' opening response to this pleading woman it is clear that he has discerned that his mission from God is limited to his own people, the Jews – those whom he calls here 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. Like all of us he had to suffer the pain of remaining within the limits of God's will.

However, as the scene progresses, Jesus finds himself involved in what the woman experiences as playful humour. Far from being insulted by the talk of children versus

house pets, she turns the words around and is so persistent in her plea that Jesus is convinced to change his mind. Her great faith brings him to see that God's will for him is wider than he had hitherto thought.

This raises the important question: How do we know God's will? The first reply is that, like Jesus, we will have to discern it moment by moment in the events of our life. An important clue is found in advice given by Jesus on another occasion. Not everyone claiming to speak God's word is in fact doing so. How do we discern true from false prophets. Jesus says: 'You will know them by their fruits'(Matthew 7:16-20). God is present where his Spirit is at work. In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul gives us some indications of the fruit of the Spirit. When we see this fruit in our own or other people's lives we can be confident that God's Spirit is there, inspiring us to be instruments of his love, as Jesus is in this scene. Paul writes: 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit'(Galatians 5:22-25). Jesus found faith in this woman. He knew, therefore, that God was attracting her and inspiring her request. And so Jesus recognised that he was being called to go beyond his earlier discernment and be for her an instrument of God's healing love.

The Spirit of God present in the Church has made clear to us the importance of freedom of religion, and has encouraged us to have an ecumenical heart as well as to respect the primacy of conscience. We are also constantly reminded to do what we can to create a welcoming community to provide a spiritual home for those searching to respond to God's love. Let us help each other be open to grace so that we become more loving, more forgiving, more gentle, more compassionate, more humble, more transparently pure and welcoming. Let us help each other so that our heart will be transformed into the Heart of Jesus, and that the face of our parish community become more and more clearly the face of Jesus. Then those who are hungry and lost and bewildered and lonely will be attracted to the communion of love for which their heart longs.

As Paul says in today's Second Reading: 'God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice'(Romans 11:29). Let us thank God for the gift of our Catholic faith. Our Church, thank God, is committed to be Catholic. It will only really be Catholic when every woman, every man and every child finds a home here at the table of the Lord. Today's readings encourage us to make that our prayer and each of us according to the measure of God's grace is called to make that prayer a reality.