

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday  
8/20/2023

## TWO SURPRISES

Today's gospel could be called two surprises. The first surprise is Jesus' treatment of the foreign woman. You could say that it goes beyond surprising to even shocking. Is Jesus buying into racism, nationalism and maybe even sexism? One author asks if Jesus is taking up the voice of oppression and even sin. The answer is no.

This woman is propelled by love for her child. She's persistent, not taking "no" for an answer. She has gumption and she has a strong faith. Jesus didn't deny her mercy but perhaps prepared her to receive great mercy. It's been said that Jesus allowed her desire to expand so that she might receive what he wanted to give: a—*Not just that her daughter be healed but that her faith grow and be revealed.* Jesus didn't just give her what she asked for. He let her faith shine forth.

St. Augustine described prayer as an exercise in holy desire. He taught that the desire you have deep within yourself, is your prayer. True prayer stretches our desire so that we might be able to receive what God wants to give. As anyone with a child in distress can imagine, that love can propel you forward, perhaps even giving a courage you didn't know you had. Jesus seems to be handing it out to this woman but she hands it right back to him.

In the gospels, Jesus seldom loses an argument and at least two of the ones we know about he lost to women. One was his mother at Wedding in Cana. *Do whatever he tells you.* The second is this foreign woman. *Woman, great is your faith!* That doesn't sound sexist to me. Three times this woman calls Jesus, Lord. This pagan foreigner acknowledges who Jesus is, while some of his own people reject him. She's the *only* person whose faith Jesus ever describes as great. The fact that Jesus praises her and cures her daughter is itself evidence that Jesus isn't sexist.

And then there is a second surprise and that is Jesus' mission will extend beyond the house of Israel, well beyond it. Jesus says that his mission is to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and yet he himself reveals that mission is broader as he acknowledges that foreign woman's faith in him. Faith is the key that opens up

citizenship into the Kingdom of God. Among those who have faith in Jesus, there are no foreigners.

At the end of the St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus gives what is called the Great Commission—to share the Gospel with all nations, not some nations but *all* nations. It will be a universal mission. It is to and for all peoples just as on the cross Jesus stretched out his arms to embrace the whole world. The sin of racism looks at *what* someone is, rather than *who* someone is. It concentrates on what is different rather than on what is shared in common—our humanity. In the end, there is one race—the human race.

Patriotism is a virtue. St. Thomas Aquinas classified it as part of the virtue of piety because after God and our parents, we are debtors to society. Nationalism takes something good like patriotism and twists it into an idol with its own worshipers. Sometimes today there's talk of Christian nationalism, but to talk about Christian nationalism is like talking about a round square. The Christian mission is a universal mission. In other words, your faith in Christ is more important than your race or your nationality.

Jesus' mission, is carried on through all the members of his body and is meant for all peoples, not just a single race or country and all of his disciples are called to share in it in their own way. The word *catholic* means universal and so we work to reach out in a universal way. For example, five days a week, our St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry serves the needy, regardless of their faith. They do so not because the people we help are necessarily Catholic but because we're Catholic and we want to share that universal love of God.

There are references to this in the Old Testament as well. That is what we hear in the first reading from the prophet Isaiah, writing centuries before Christ. He speaks of foreigners joining themselves to the Lord and that God's house is to be a house of prayer for all peoples. In the second reading, St. Paul describes himself as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Similar to last week's gospel of Jesus walking on the water, we find the importance of faith and of worship. Both the disciples in the boat and the Canaanite woman pay Jesus homage. The surprise of Jesus' reaction to this foreign woman

gives way to the surprise that God's love is universal, calling us to walk by faith. What does it mean to walk by faith?

It is to acknowledge that there is something greater in life than what we can observe with our senses. It means that there's a deeper reality that while not irrational, goes beyond rational—it means that when we deal with matters of faith we're dealing with a mystery, not a problem. That we find meaning in a person, in the person of Jesus who both reveals God but also reveals to us what it means to be human. It means that we're willing to take risks, to step on in love.

At Mass we celebrate our faith and here our faith is strengthened. By the presence of one another gathered together in the name of Christ, by Jesus at work through those his ministers, through the Word of God and through the Eucharist we seek to live lives of intentional faith. Here we gather in faith but here we go forth in faith so that by our lives, each in our own way, we might reflect the light of God's love, God's surprising, universal love.