

Lent II 2024  
Saint Patrick's  
2/25/2024

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

From the Gospel: “... **behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.**” (Matthew 15:22)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

*Amen.*

One of the most vexing problems with which the earliest Church had to deal was the “Gentile problem.”

As one of our textbooks for a study of the Fathers put it succinctly, “the first Christians were Jews.”

This is abundantly clear from both the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

It is entirely reasonable those Jewish first Christians would have thought of Jesus as their Messiah, not the Gentile’s Messiah.

In fact, most Jews believed the Messiah would be military leader who would deliver them from the yoke of the Gentiles.

In many ways, the name “King of the Jews” points to that belief.

A king is the one who leads the army against the nation’s enemies.

Certainly, David, who was the model for all future Jewish kings was himself a very successful general.

If then Jesus was indeed “the Son of David” was it not entirely reasonable to expect him to also be a man of war who would come to defeat and destroy the enemies of the Jewish people as David did.

Of course, the irony is Jesus was indeed a mighty man of war, the greatest every born, but his warfare was not against human beings; as Saint Paul put it, **“we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”** (Ephesians 6:12)

Even in the Old Testament, there are hints of God’s plan of salvation being for all men, not just for the descendants of Abraham.

When God blessed Abraham he promised, **“in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.”** (Genesis 22:18)

The seed of Abraham, Jesus, would be God’s blessing to “all nations.”

(It is worth remembering the word here translated as “nations” is also translated as “gentiles.”)

Another hint is found in the story of Jonah.

Jonah hated the Ninevites (Niniva being the capital city of Assyria, the Israelites deadliest enemy.

He hated them so much when God called him to preach repentance to the Ninevites, Johan tried to run away from God not for fear of failing, but rather fear of succeeding.

Indeed, trying to justify his disobedience Jonah told God, **“I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”** (Jonah 4:2)

He was afraid if he preached repentance to the Ninevites they would indeed repent, and God would forgive them rather than destroying them; and so, it turned out, making Johah very angry.

God rebuked Jonah for his anger saying **“...should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?”** (John 4:11)

Or we could consider the story of Ruth.

Ruth was indeed a gentile, a Moabitess, but through her loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi, she was found worthy of becoming the great-grandmother of David.

Nevertheless, despite these clues, most Jews were greatly opposed even to eating with gentiles or having them in their homes.

Obviously, if Christianity were not to become just another tiny sect of Judaism (which probably would have disappeared in AD 70) but rather what Christ intended, the Church Catholic, the way of salvation for all people, this attitude had to change.

Much of the New Testament speaks to this issue.

Right in the beginning of the Gospel according to Saint John we have these famous lines:

**That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:9-13)**

John sets out clearly Christ **“lighteth every man that cometh into the world,”** every man, not just Abraham’s descendants.

He also faces the reality many, indeed most of Jesus own people **“received him not.”**

This does not change the reality **“as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.”**

All who received him, both Gentile and Jew.

It perhaps goes without saying Saint Paul struggled mightily with this issue.

In particular, he had to deal with those who demanded men must first become Jews before they could become Christians.

This is perhaps most obvious in the Epistle to the Galatians.

Also, Paul deals with this issue when he speaks of salvation being by Grace, not by works of the Law.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is an extended argument for the superiority of the Christianity to Judaism.

Luke, probably because he himself was a gentile, and because of his association with Paul, reveals the acceptability of gentiles in many stories, especially the story of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion who was told by God in a dream to summon Peter and hear what he had to say.

Peter too had had a dream which gave him the assurance to go to Cornelius house and preach the gospel.

When Peter preached, those gathered in Cornelius' home received the Holy Ghost, which led Peter to say, **“Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?”** (Acts 10:47)

It is worth remembering the encounter between Philip the deacon and the Ethiopian Eunuch, who was probably one of the first gentiles to be baptized.

And then there is the promise Jesus gave to his Apostles at the Assumption:

**“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”** (Acts 1:8)

Clearly, this is our Lord's endorsement of the mission of his church to be universal.

Of course, none of this is terribly surprising to us, being gentile Christians, but we can see why the New Testament writers had to make the same points over and over.

Which brings us around to our Gospel Lesson for today, which represents “a,” perhaps even “the,” pivotal moment in salvation history.

We know the story well enough.

It begins:

**Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.**

**And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.**

After having brooked much contradiction, Jesus has left Jewish country and is now in Gentile territory; just to emphasize this point, we are told the woman was a Canaanite, not only a gentile, but a descendant of the hated enemy the Jews had been fighting since the time of Joshua.

Even so, she had apparently heard of Jesus and believed he could, if he would, heal her daughter.

It seems she is at the end of her rope; she must have used every resource to be found amongst her own people before going to a Jewish rabbi for help.

He seems not indeed particularly inclined to help her initially.

**“He answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us.”**

At this point, we cannot know exactly what was in his mind, but he does not immediately send her away.

Unless he was just being cruel, which is not a characteristic which come to mind when I think of Jesus, I think it is possible he was thinking out loud when he said,

**“I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”**

Certainly, the Canaanite woman doesn't seem to take this as a firm “no.”

**“Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.”**

Her prayer is the sincerest prayer anyone ever utters, it is called the “foxhole prayer,” and as we all know, there are no atheists in a foxhole.

**“But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.”**

Still thinking out loud? Perhaps testing her resolve? Who can say?

Undeterred, the woman has one more go.

**“She said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.”**

It takes a lot of humility, or desperation and faith, to accept being likened to a dog.

If that sounds familiar, we say it every time we say the Prayer of Humble Access.

**“Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.”**

There are only two people Jesus ever praises for their faith, this woman, and the Centurion with the sick servant; interestingly, both were gentiles, make of that what you will.

In closing, it is not entirely clear what we are to glean from this passage.

We already know the Church is for everyone, both Jew and Gentile, although that was surely not understood by all of the first Christians.

Where it may have something to say to us is in our ideas of whom we should try to reach with the Gospel, and how to go about it.

It is natural, just like those first Christians, to think the ones Jesus came to save are folks like us.

We are naturally more comfortable worshipping and fellowshiping with others who are like us.

But is that what Jesus wants?

Do folks need to be well educated, middle class or more, white, and conservative before they are welcome among us?

Or is there room in our hearts and in our church for the uneducated, the poor, non-whites, or even liberals?

Might they also be the sheep for whom Christ was content to lay down his life?

Or is perhaps there is something to the old Sunday School song?

Jesus came to save the children  
All the children of the world  
Red, and yellow, black, and white  
They are precious in His sight  
Jesus came to save the children of the world.

And now we ascribe, as is most justly due, unto Thee, O Lord, all might, majesty, power, and dominion, both now and forever. *Amen.*