

*A story of a news reporter who somehow managed to reach heaven. Forced by his habit, he even began to interview St. Peter. He asked, "How many Catholics are in heaven?" St. Peter replied: "Not a single Catholic." The reporter continued, "How many Baptists?" "Not even one," replied St. Peter. The man was surprised. He said: "Oh then, what about Hindus and Muslims? We don't have any Hindu or Muslim either, was the reply of St. Peter". Then who are here in heaven, asked in his astonishment. "St. Peter explained to the baffled journalist, "In heaven all are children of God. There is no distinction as Catholics, Baptists or Hindus and Muslims. People of all color, creed, nationality, and races are welcome in heaven and here, all are children of God.*

Yes, indeed, all are children of God. And this is the teaching of this Sunday's readings. God's saving power is not confined or limited to one group. God's salvation is open to all children of God.

A theme running through today's readings is that of universalism. In the first reading we find: *even the foreigner... will be accepted...*, a non-genetic incorporation: *my house... a house of prayer for all peoples*. The psalm response sings: *O God, let all the nations praise you*. And in the second reading Paul presents himself to the Romans as *apostle of the Gentiles*.

All three readings today speak of the universal nature of the "Kingdom of God, and salvation" contrary to the theory that salvation was offered first to the Jews and only then to the rest of the world. Although God set the Hebrew people apart as His chosen race, He included all nations in His plan for salvation and blessed all families of the earth in Abraham (Gn 12:1-3).

In the First Reading of today, Prophet Isaiah speaks on behalf of God that the house of the Lord shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. The Prophet tells them that God's blessings are available also to foreigners. He says: "The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants...these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their...offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." For God there is no distinction among human beings based on race, caste, or color.

In the second reading, Paul who is considered the Apostle of Gentiles, explains that, although the Jews were the chosen people, most of them denied the promised Messiah, and, consequently, God turned to the Gentiles who received mercy through their Faith in Jesus. Salvation was made available to the non-Jews including us.

In the Gospel story, Jesus demonstrates that salvation is meant for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews by healing the daughter of a Gentile woman as a reward for her strong Faith and perseverance in her request. Thus, Jesus shows that God's mercy and love are available to all who call out to Him in prayer with deep Faith.

Two things are significant about her: she was a woman and a “Canaanite” – a foreigner. She belonged to two groups therefore who were considered inferior by the religious leaders of the day and so is representative of all those who by their greatness challenge the false values of our culture.

The Canaanites were the ancestral enemies of the Jews and were regarded as pagans and idolaters and, hence, as ritually unclean.

By granting the persistent request of this Canaanite woman, Jesus demonstrates that his mission is to break down the barriers and to remove the long-standing walls of division and mutual prejudice between the Jews and the Gentiles. God does not discriminate but welcomes all who believe in Him, who ask for His mercy and who try to do His will.

Another great lesson we can take home from today's Gospel is that we all need to pull down our walls of separation and share in the universality of God's love. We need to pull down the barriers of our pride, intolerance and prejudice which separate us from God as well as with other people. Incidents of racism and social discrimination continue to take place in this country from time to time. Today's Gospel teaches us that we also need to stand up against such hate crimes, either in prayers or whatever other ways we can.

Just like this Canaanite woman we need to persist in our prayers. In spite of humiliating experience or response she did not give up, but she continued her effort and finally she succeeded in achieving her goal. Just like this woman we might experience that God is not listening to our prayers. But we should never give up but be persistent.

Have you ever prayed to God and felt He was not listening? If you have ever prayed intensely for a serious problem, and felt that God did not answer your prayer, you can identify with her.

God demands faith from us, even when we believe we have none. He is willing to “pull” our faith out of us indeed, in order to test us and purify our faith. Jesus knows what sort of faith this woman has. He is willing to draw it out, because without faith on this woman's part, He will not work a miracle.