

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

Not all revealed truths have come to us in a blinding flash, whole and entire. Salvation history has often unfolded gradually. Isaiah is dealing here with the practical problem of what to do about non-Israelites, who are mingling more and more with the chosen people. What we hear in this reading is God's solution to the problem. Foreigners who abide by the essentials of the covenant will be welcome on "the holy mountain," that is, Jerusalem and the temple. Though there are certain restrictions placed on these foreigners, they are clearly part of God's saving plan. Thus we see the chosen people begin to wrestle with the notion that God offers saving mercy to all people. It was not an easy concept for them to accept, as we shall see in both the second reading and the gospel today. The radical inclusiveness taught by Jesus was revolutionary, but it has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures where it says: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for ALL peoples."¹ In this section of third Isaiah, the Temple is not a place of exclusion or exclusiveness, but is the place where foreigners are welcomed, not merely tolerated.³

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

¹Thus says the Lord: Observe what is right, do what is just; for my salvation is about to come, my justice, about to be revealed. The point here is that salvation is coming but a life based on moral precepts is necessary.²

⁶The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, ministering to him, loving the name of the Lord, and becoming his servants—all who keep the Sabbath free from profanation In Judaism, the Sabbath became one of the most important observances. It was developed along with the religion of the synagogue and was significant because it did not depend upon the temple and could be observed everywhere. It was a day of religious assembly and of the Sabbath repose. The nature of the Sabbath rest was the subject of much discussion of the rabbis who enumerated 39 types of work, which were prohibited on the Sabbath. One could walk only about 3000 feet from one's home, which was called a Sabbath day's journey.⁵ The Christian celebration of Sunday, the day of the Lord's Resurrection,⁴ (CCC 2174) replaces that of the Sabbath,⁴ (CCC 2175) and has been the practice of the Church from Apostolic times.⁴ (CCC 2178) The faithful are required to participate in the Mass (⁴) (CCC 2180) and are also to refrain from engaging in work or activities that would keep them from performing works of mercy, and they are to spend time in appropriate relaxation of mind and body.⁴ (CCC 2185) **and hold to my covenant,** The old rulings from Leviticus and Deuteronomy did not permit eunuchs or foreigners to take part in the assembly of Israel but this oracle displays a much more open and universalist attitude for there is no objection to eunuchs and foreigners provided that they observe the Sabbath and the Covenant. Blood ties are no longer the criteria for membership of the community of the people of God: now it suffices that a person keep to the moral teaching laid down in the old Covenant and worship the true God.¹⁴

⁷them I will bring to my holy mountain Zion is God's holy mountain.⁵ This came to refer to the Temple in Jerusalem, the city of Jerusalem and the entire Promised Land to come in which God dwells among his chosen people.¹⁵ **and make joyful in my house of prayer;** The Temple here receives its "highest title," one that is inscribed over synagogues today: "house of prayer." Jesus quoted these words when he drove the money-changers from the Temple.² In the future when Jesus would cleanse the temple using these words, the prophecy would be fulfilled.¹⁴ **their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.** This universal perspective is the part of the background for the Church founded by Christ to be called "Catholic" which means "universal." In the Didache (the compilation of the teachings of the apostles) the prayer of the Eucharist is that "as grain, once scattered on the hillsides, was in this broken bread made one, so from all lands Thy church be gathered into Thy kingdom by Thy Son."³

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

Brothers and sisters:

13I am speaking to you Gentiles. Here Paul addresses his Gentile readers directly, cautioning them against pride. Some Gentile converts looked disdainfully upon Israel (for there was a lot of anti-Semitism at the time,) as though they had replaced the covenant people in the messianic age. Paul not only rejects this, he warns that Gentiles, too, can be rejected as easily as they have been accepted. They should rather marvel that God has given them a share in Israel's spiritual blessings.⁶ **Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I glory in my ministry**

14in order to make my race **jealous and thus save some of them.** Although he is a Christian, St. Paul still looks on himself as a member of the Jewish race.¹⁶

15For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, Paul presumes that the Gentiles have the Good News preached to them *because* it was rejected by the Jews.¹ Israel's rejection of the gospel has led to the reconciliation of the Gentiles to God and even the whole universe which was cursed along with Adam¹⁶ **what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?** It wasn't long until the non-Jewish believers became the majority in the church. This turning from the Jews toward the Gentiles did not mean that God had abandoned them; it meant that when a Jew came to Christ, there was great rejoicing, as if a dead person had come back to life.⁷ Like the OT prophets, Paul envisions the spiritual recovery of Israel as a national resurrection.⁶

29For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. The Jews have a special relationship with God for they were the first to hear the Word of God and as we read last Sunday, "to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ."⁴ (CCC 839) God never goes back on anything he promises; therefore he continues to call the Jews to enter the chosen people. God's calling, which is eternal, cannot cease; but we for our part can reject his call. This is reassuring to us for it means that even if we abandon him at any point, we can always return to our earlier fidelity; for he is still there, waiting for us.⁸

30Just as you once disobeyed God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, Gentile disobedience was disbelief in God. The attitude of Jews toward Christ represents the same sort of disobedience.¹⁶

31so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. God's mercy and his love are not limited to one special elite group. God's mercy is intended to fall on all of his people.⁷

32For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all. All of us have experienced the mercy of God because he died for us, knowing full well that we would be sinners.⁷ God allows all to sin that all might taste salvation. His saving plan moves forward despite man's rebellion.⁶ There are a number of churches that condemn the Catholic Church, but the reverse is not true. The Catechism says that the Church is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian but who do not profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter. Nevertheless, they are accepted as brothers in the Lord.⁴ (CCC838) In regard to Jews, it says that when the People of God in the New Covenant delve into their own mystery, they discover their link with the Jewish People, "the first to hear the Word of God." The Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God's revelation in the Old Covenant.⁴ (CCC 839) Finally, in regard to those who are not Christian and are not Jewish, it says that "The

Catholic Church recognizes in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since He gives life and breath and all things and wants all men to be saved. Thus the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as “a preparation for the Gospel and given by Him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.”⁴ (CCC 843)

Matthew 15:21-28

*The crux of this reading is the Canaanite woman’s faith, which crashes through every possible human barrier erected to exclude certain people from God’s saving love. As in all the readings today, we see the theme of universal inclusion developed in striking ways. Inclusion requires both a deep-seated desire and a recognition of our need to be included.*¹

21At that time, Jesus withdrew Jesus withdrew to this area to escape persecution from Herod and from the Jewish authorities and to concentrate on training his Apostles.¹² **to the region of Tyre and Sidon.** Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities in Phoenicia, north of Palestine, in present-day Lebanon. Sidon was the first-born son of Canaan and thus the woman is a “Canaanite.”⁹ In Genesis we read how Noah cursed Canaan and said that he should be the lowest of slaves to his brothers. Scott Hahn gives us an interesting background on this: Shem had an incestuous relationship with his mother and the resulting child was Canaan. We can follow that lineage and see that they were always enemies of the descendants of Shem and Japheth and they were thought to embody all that was wicked and godless.¹⁰

22And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, The Canaanites were supposed to have been driven out when the Jews invaded and occupied the Promised Land. She is not just a Gentile, but one who has always been an enemy of the Jews. Not only this, she has spoken to a man in public—she has broken two taboos.¹⁶ **“Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!** Many Jews and even some Gentiles who shared their hope recognized in Jesus the fundamental attributes of the messianic “Son of David,” promised by God to Israel.⁴ (CCC 439) **My daughter is tormented by a demon.”**

23But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her. Jesus’ disciples came and asked him, **“Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us.”**

24He said in reply, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** Jesus came to bring his Gospel to the whole world, but he himself addressed only the Jews; later on he will charge his Apostles to preach the Gospel to pagans. St. Paul, in his missionary journeys, also adopted the policy of preaching in the first instance to the Jews.¹²

25But the woman came and did Jesus homage, The woman, realizing that words are not enough to make full contact with Jesus, accompanies her reiterated pleas with the gesture of deep prostration.¹⁷ **saying, “Lord, help me.”** Very often in the Gospels people address Jesus as “Lord.” This title testifies to the respect and trust of those who approach him for help and healing. At the prompting of the Holy Spirit, “Lord” expresses the recognition of the divine mystery of Jesus.⁴ (CCC 448)

26He said in reply, **“It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”** The “food of the children” refers to Israel and its inherited right to God’s blessings. “Dogs” was a derogatory Jewish name for pagans and non-Jews. The word that Jesus used was literally, “little dogs” or “puppies.”¹¹

27She said, **“Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.”** The woman gets the point, obviously, and responds in kind: “Surely you wouldn’t deny the household pets a scrap from the table.” It is a charming bit of repartee, but it is also a persistent and convincing expression of faith arising out of the love the woman feels for her ailing daughter. God never refuses such humble love.¹ St. John Chrysostom preached that the Canaanite woman signifies repentant souls.

Incapable of boasting, contrite sinners lean wholly on God's mercy; they recognize their weakness before God and can only beg for blessings, unable to demand from God gifts that he freely bestows. Only the humble and faith-filled are rewarded with spiritual healing.⁹

²⁸Then Jesus said to her in reply, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And the woman's daughter was healed from that hour. Jesus teaches us filial boldness: "Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will." Such is the power of prayer and of faith that does not doubt: "all things are possible to him who believes." Jesus is as saddened by the "lack of faith" of his own neighbors and the "little faith" of his own disciples as he is struck with admiration at the great faith of the Roman centurion and the Canaanite woman.⁴

Fr. Don Pellegrino had an interview with John Paul II that was carried on Spirit Daily (an online site for Catholic news) in which the former pope said: "He who does not believe in the devil does not believe in the Gospel." He went on to explain that the strategies of Satan to seduce people today include 1. making people believe that hell does not exist, 2. that sin does not exist, and 3. that Satan is nothing but one more experience to try out. The three great passions on which Satan relies are 1. concupiscence (sexual desire), 2. success and 3. power. The way in which one becomes the victim of a demon is to persist in sin, to be the victim of a curse, or to give oneself up to the practice of occultism. In the June 14, 2005 issue of *Charisma* magazine, Ralph Martin wrote that Pope John Paul II performed exorcisms for people who were demonically troubled.

Father Gabriel Amorth, who for some years has been the chief exorcist of Rome, points out in his book that Jesus gave the power to expel demons to all those who believe in him and act in his name. He is referring to private prayers of deliverance. He also notes that all priests, even those who are not exorcists, have a particular power that derives from their ministerial ordination. However, full-scale exorcisms can only be conducted by a priest with the permission of a local bishop. He points out that exorcists receive an additional, particular power and using the formulas and prayers suggested by the Catholic Church, these priests administer a sacramental that, unlike private prayer, involves the intercession of the Church. He also highly recommends confession and communion as being very powerful in fighting demons.¹³

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Aelred R. Rosser, (2) The Book Of Isaiah Chapters 40-66" by Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., (3) "A Celebrants Guide to the New Sacramentary" by Kevin W. Irwin, (4) "Catechism Of The Catholic Church," (5) "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (6) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (7) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken and Marie Finn, (8) "The Navarre Bible: Romans And Galatians," (9) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (10) "A Father Who Keeps His Promises" by Scott Hahn, (11) "The Gospel of Matthew" by William Barclay, (12) "The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew," (13) "An Exorcist Tells His Story" by Fr. Gabriele Amorth, (14) "The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets," (15) "Wikipedia", the Online Encyclopedia, (16) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, and (17) "Fire Of Mercy, Heart Of The Word" by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.