

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Rev. Jeffrey M. Kemper

Scriptures: Is 56: 1, 6-7 □ Ps 67: 2-3, 5-6, 8 □ Rom 11: 13-15, 29-32 □ Mt 15: 21-28

When I was in the seminary, Fr. Maly, a great scholar and Christian, explained to us the “scandal of particularity” (a great term to throw around at a cocktail party if you want to sound pretty smart).

The “scandal of particularity” is the fact that, because Jesus became human with all the limitations of being human except that of sin, living in a specific culture at a specific time, we might not always understand the context in which something is said or done, and therefore can be scandalized at what occurred.

Such may certainly be the case with today’s gospel passage. It is not easy to understand, at least from our 21st century perspective, the reference Christ makes to “food for children being thrown to dogs” as anything but offensive. Did Jesus carried within him the prejudices and biases of his people towards this Canaanite woman, a half-believer or non-believer? Or is it that in the context of his time, in this particular situation, Christ was using what appears to be an ethnic slur to emphasize a greater truth?

I think it is certainly the second. Jesus, using an attitude of the average Jew of His day towards those who were either half-believers or non-believers in the religion of Israel, sets a contrast as to whom may be the real child of God. For Jesus, the real child of God is not simply one born of Jewish parents or circumcised, but one whose faith is great. Jesus, you see, always sees with a lens that looks into the heart, with a lens that sees wider and farther than the human eye.

God sees a future not rooted primarily in separating people because of superficial means, but drawing them together by the saving grace of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. As Isaiah and the other prophets foretell, on the day of the Lord God will indeed separate good from bad, but goodness and evil will not be determined by nationality, religion, race.

It will be determined by what each person sought to be and do from her or his own limited perspective with the degree of faith that God gave her or him. Saints and repentant sinners will be drawn to the Lord, citizens and foreigners of good intention will join hands in the journey to God’s house.

Today’s readings, and so many others from the Bible, call us to see that we are not saved simply because our religion is Catholic, our nationality is American, or because we are white, black, red, yellow, brown, green or blue.

We are saved by the mercy of God who sees every human soul as having equal worth and value not because of anything we have done on our own, but because we accepted God's amazing grace according to our ability to receive it in our own contexts.

(This does not mean that one can choose a faith simply by one's own preference, rather, one must respond to the truth, which a person can only grasp according to his or her ability and grace given by God.)

Today's readings give us the opportunity to take a look at our own attitudes and see if we see clearly as God sees, or with distorted, narrow, nearsighted vision. Do we think of ourselves as "more saved" than others simply because we bear the title Catholic, or do we recognize that our life as Catholic Christians calls us to a deeper responsibility to lead others to the kingdom of God?

Do we live with a sense that God looks more favorably upon Americans because of the blessings we have received, or do we recognize that the gifts we have received as Americans are given to us so that we can ensure the dignity of all people regardless of race, color, or creed?

Do we live with a sense that people of other races are somehow less than we are because we see ourselves as the "best race"?

Do we recognize that some of what we see as blessings that we have received may have been borne on the backs of people who were mistreated and oppressed?

How we see other people in relationship to the Lord may ultimately tell us how we see the Lord. Is God a god of favorites, or a God with universal love?

Is God a god who gives but does not expect us to do what He has done for us – or a God who calls us to give what we have received to others.

May we always see the Lord in the right light; may we see our neighbor in that same light, for when we do these two things, we will see ourselves as the Lord sees us.

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