

20th Sunday in the Ordinary Time (A)
(Isaiah 56:1.6-7 / Matthew 15:21-28)
17.08.2014

From the very outset of Biblical revelation the notion of *universalism* is present.

God's first covenant is made with the whole of creation.

Even when God chooses a people for Himself (His Chosen People, Israel), the Covenant He makes with them is in view of the salvation of all.

By Abraham all the nations of the earth are to be blessed.

That being said, it has always been a struggle for those who are aware that they are loved and have been chosen by God to admit that the Lord's salvation is not just for themselves alone, but also for others, people from beyond the confines of their own community.

The consciousness of a particular group that they are chosen by God can lead its members to imagine that their election precludes and even totally excludes others.

The chosen group's members can think that it is they alone who are blessed.

We can see how this can lead some people to regard those of another faith group or background than their own as being worth little more than *house dogs* (an image used in today's gospel text).

We have only to look at the on-going struggle in this land to see the consequences when exclusive thought patterns set to work.

The proclamation used by some *For God and Ulster* is often matched with the thought that God aligns Himself, first and foremost and maybe even exclusively, with the adherents to an Ulster Unionist vision for the land,

At the other side of the spectrum, the belief can be held by those who are strongly nationalist/republican that, first and foremost and maybe even exclusively, God must surely be on the side of those who sign up to an All Ireland solution as the only way forward.

As if things are not bad enough on the political front, with people reasoning in diametrically opposed ways, there are also some within the Churches who would claim that what they uphold to be correct religious doctrine and Church order implies that others of a different belief system and faith practice are not really pleasing to God. These others are considered to be *in error* and, as such, frankly displeasing to the Lord.

There are those who would even dare to deny believers of some Churches the right to call themselves Christian.

They see the appellation *Christian* as only truly applicable to adherents to their own particular brand of Christianity.

We hear it said by some, with great assurance and without any embarrassment whatsoever, that *many who believe themselves to be Christians are not really Christians at all.*

Clearly, people who talk like this think they know who is *in* and who is *not in*!

Today's Scripture readings invite us to move beyond such a limited view of things.

The texts we listen to this morning invite us to enter into God's wide and all-embracing vision for His people and for the whole of humanity.

The two readings we heard proclaimed really call into question and clearly dismiss any right we might claim for ourselves to say who is *in* and who is *out* when it comes to the household of God.

Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord makes it clear that His desire is that His House be a *House of Prayer for all Peoples.*

That is to say, a house in which nobody feels excluded and, to quote the psalm, *all can find their home*.

The phrase found in the bottom line of today's first reading, *A House of Prayer for all Peoples*, resonates strongly with us here at Holy Cross Monastery.

This monastery was consecrated as *a House of Prayer for all*.

The liturgy of consecration of this church building sought to signify that.

What has been lived here ever since then, these past ten years, has thankfully confirmed the rightness of our spiritual intuition that it should be so. We are gratified and, I believe, God is glorified, that people from a great diversity of backgrounds, have responded to the invitation (the Lord's invitation echoed by our community) to feel welcome in this place and to find their home here along with us.

It is so important for us to remember that we are all guests in God's house.

Yes, in the household of God, we are, all of us, guests together.

None of us has the upper hand. None of us has a privilege over and above another. None of us is better than another.

We have all been chosen and we are all of us *called to be one in God's house*.

We are invited to situate ourselves in each other's regard as brothers and sisters should: seeing ourselves as equally loved by our one God and Father, all standing before Him on an equal footing.

That does not mean that there are not differences between us.

There are differences between us. It is healthy that there should be.

We would be unwise to fail to acknowledge our differences.

Indeed, to fail to acknowledge difference is dangerous. It is both hurtful and harmful.

Ultimately, the failure to respect differences breeds anger and this usually degenerates into unhealthy bitterness which, in turn, pours out into violence in a bid to release the poison that has contaminated our hearts.

St Paul affirms, *with Christ all the barriers between us have fallen, we are all one family in God*.

The implications of that statement go further still. They truly are far reaching.

It is not only that the barrier has fallen between Jew and Gentile, making them one.

Writing to the Galatians Paul teaches that all sorts of divisions have fallen because of Christ's reconciling work.

The message for us is that all our differences and divisions that must be looked at in another way.

Differences of gender, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, social class, educational background, sexual orientation etc. should not lead to mutual exclusion.

The differences between us must be lived together in harmony and no longer seen as a cause of separatist division.

We must learn to accommodate one another in the one family of God.

In chapter 2 of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians it is spelt out to us how *through Jesus Christ, the barrier between God and sinful humanity has been removed*.

But, even more than that has been brought about for us.

Christ's work of reconciliation did not stop there with the removal of *the barrier between humanity and God*.

Christ's work of reconciliation also removed all the obstacles that alienate us from other people.

In Christ, we have peace both with God and with others!

All this implies that our mutual fears and mutual exclusions, our past hurts and present grievances, can and should be overcome.

It befalls us to undertake to make a new beginning together, with God's help!

I once heard an Anglican Archbishop, who was preaching in this church, put things this way: *Our God is in the construction business.*

I would say that what God wants is to build us up together so that we may form one consolidated house of God.

The Lord wants us to allow ourselves to be fashioned and shaped into His Holy Temple and He wants us to be instrumental in the building work that needs to be undertaken to bring about the construction of His *House of Prayer for all Peoples.*

Practically speaking, in this land, we must learn to move beyond an unhealthy *two communities approach* to everything.

We must move towards a healthy *one community approach.*

In a *healthy one community approach*, differences between the members of this one diverse community will be respected. More than that, they will be rejoiced in! They will no longer be seen as a menace or considered to be a mutual threat. Rather, they will be appreciated as a source of mutual enrichment, a life-giving force and an energising dynamism.

The words Isaiah spoke in our first reading were addressed to God's people in exile.

In a way it could be said that those to whom the Apostle Paul addressed himself when he wrote to the Churches were also exiled people. Addressing the issue of divisions among Christians, Paul reminded his addressees that, while they had been exiled from one another, they were now reconciled in Christ.

It could be said of the Church we form today that we too are an exiled, alienated people.

Our Churches are estranged from each other.

Many Christian communities are inclined to hold each other at bay.

In this land people are also alienated from each other because of different political opinions and divergent national aspirations.

In many ways it is not only in a state of exile and estrangement that we find ourselves, but also in an entrapment.

This is especially true when we allow our differences and divergences to hold us apart from others by closing us in upon ourselves.

This does not need to happen!

Our differences and divergences can be and should be allowed, and even encouraged, to co-exist. We have seen that it is quasi-inevitable that violence will erupt when differences and divergences are not recognised as legitimate and when one party seeks to dominate the other, in the hope of gaining the upper hand, and, eventually, cancelling the other out.

In the sorry state we are in, here in this land, at this time, God reaches out to us, in the same way that He reached out to His people in time past.

God proposes to us now what He proposed to them then: an all-embracing, all-inclusive covenant. God wants to lead all of us in the way of reconciliation through forgiveness.

When we engage ourselves in the Lord's way of reconciliation, what we discover is that He comes to complete within us the work we have begun under His inspiration.

The Lord comes to give us His power to restore our broken relationships and build together the life we are called to share.

I wonder how many of us truly believe that.

I wonder how many truly believe that reconciliation is possible in this land.

I also wonder in regard to other conflict situations, beyond these shores, in our widely divergent world, how many believe that reconciliation is possible

I think it is important to ask the question, even among peace workers and negotiators: how many truly believe that deep differences of opinion can be reconciled?

If people do not believe that differences can be reconciled, then they never will be!

Maybe this is the crux of the problem here in Northern Ireland and in other conflict areas.

Is there not a mentality that thinks: *The other side will never change?!*

What does this imply?

Does it not betray the belief that *the other side* must eventually come to *my side's way of thinking?*

We must all learn to leave aside *our side's way* to follow *Christ's way!*

Ultimately, if we are to follow Christ's way, this demands of all parties a certain death to themselves.

Christ's way is, after all a paschal road.

In the paschal mystery, life comes through death!

Of course, what I am saying here has implications not only on the grand scale of things.

It has implications in all our relationships.

It has implications for the life of married couples, in friendships, between parents and children, in our families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, monasteries, religious communities, parishes.

Yes, it has implications in all these places just as much as it has on a larger scale of things, between peoples of different cultures, skin-colour, creed and race.

In the whole domain of conflict resolution, how important it is for all who are engaged in the process, before they sit down with others, to be honest enough to sit with themselves in order to listen and admit to what is lurking latent within themselves.

This hidden ill within us need to be reconciled first.

Often we are blind to the very things that obscure our reasoning and make it impossible for us to find a way through.

We can be (most often are) in denial in regard to our prejudices, suspicions, fears, past hurts etc.

As long as we are in denial and failing to acknowledge the ill that have scarred us and still mar us, we will never manage to make any real progress.

We may dictate to others afar off, (often we will do so, and maybe even help these distant others by the insights we bring to them), but *back home on the ranch* we will not make any real progress.

(In saying that, I am aware that it is a danger for a preacher to point out to others things that need to change in all around and yet be blind to his own need to repent.)

It is ironic that political representatives of all persuasions here in Northern Ireland (including those who refuse honest dialogue with each other in this country) are often jetting off on jaunts to help opposing factions, elsewhere in the world, encouraging them to sit around one table to find a way forward.

Again on the smaller scale, the same kind of thing happens with each one of us, so we should not deflect entirely from our personal difficulties by picking on the politicians..

I have heard more than one spouse say that they simply cannot get over how others see their partner, given what they experience of him or her in their relationship at home.

Some might think that these reflections have brought us a long way away from the Scripture readings proposed for our meditation today.

I do not believe they have.

You see, just like the Canaanite woman in the gospel, we can be, and sometimes are, a bit desperate for help. We are *out of ourselves*. Like the Canaanite woman we are demented, driven insane by the suffering which affects us.

Sometimes, there is no other way forward for us other than to do as this woman did and express that desperation in cries of distress.

If we are lucid and honest, here in Northern Ireland, in many respects, we would have to admit to being in an insane state (that means literally, an unhealthy state)

In this, we find ourselves in a similar position to so many other suffering peoples in places of conflict elsewhere in this divided world.

The Canaanite woman shows us that desperation can be the catalyst that pushes things forward. It can be our desperation that propels us to find solutions and to dare to cross barriers to do so.

In today's Scripture texts we see how the Canaanite woman who was desperate came before Jesus, pleading for His intervention in regard to what was apparently an insane situation. She found favour with the Lord for daring to do this. Her plight, her suffering, her pain, were taken into consideration and given attention.

The Canaanite women dared to do what we are all called to do: she dared to cross the barriers set around her own and around the Jewish people.

It took a lot of courage on her behalf to even speak to Jesus because of the racism of her time and yet she did.

This nameless woman went looking for help and healing where she saw mercy and goodness to be at work, offering to all new life.

Although she met with annoyance from the disciples and a certain reticence on Jesus' own behalf to begin with, this woman nonetheless persevered in her humble request for the healing of her daughter.

Nothing was going to deter her from seeking out and being accorded the Lord's help.

Jesus responded to this woman. She won favour with Him. Her hope was not disappointed.

I expect this gospel passage can also speak to many of us (even most of us) at a more personal level.

Are there not times when we feel desperate (greatly pained, aching within) because of areas of suffering in our personal lives?

At times we can be interiorly crucified because of unresolved relational issues.

We can go through the living hell of alienation from ourselves and others because of unresolved conflict. Our well-being can be affected by the profound hurt we feel deep inside, even if (indeed, especially when) it is not openly expressed and worked through by the process of dialogue.

We can be driven nearly insane by the pain of broken relationships which we long to see healed.

Many of us are nursing gaping wounds due to hurts received and/or maybe a deep sadness because of the hurts and wounds we have caused another/others.

Most often we will try to keep hidden from the sight of those around us the agony we are enduring within.

Like the Canaanite woman the call addressed to us today is to have both and humility and the audacity to call out for help in the expectation that it will be given to us.

The mixture of both humility and audaciousness (confidence trust and holy hope) is expressed beautifully in those words in today's gospel passage: *even the house dogs can eat the scraps which fall from their master's table.*

Our Anglican brothers and sisters allude to these words in their prayer of humble access as they celebrate the Communion liturgy.

They say: *We do not presume to come to this Your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercy. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under Your table, but You are the same Lord whose nature is always to show mercy.*

If only we all grasped the importance of humbly approaching one another, instead of arrogantly reproaching one another, then I am sure the healing of which we stand in need would be accorded to us!

Indeed, we would begin to mediate this healing to one another.

We would become for one another channels of God's life-restoring, reconciling grace.

Amen!