

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Isaiah 56:1. 5-7 / Matthew 15:21-28)  
20.08.2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today's gospel passage describes the meeting between Jesus and a Canaanite woman, that is to say a woman who is pagan, not Jewish. This woman, who was looking for someone exercising a ministry of healing, came to Jesus and said: "Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil". There we have a cry coming from a woman whose life is marked by suffering, the cry of a mother inhabited by a sense of helplessness as she looks on at her daughter tormented by an evil that cannot be healed. Nobody can heal her daughter. She cannot heal her daughter.

Jesus initially ignores this woman, but given her maternal heart, she insists that he heed her. She persists even when Jesus says to his disciples that his mission is directed only "to the lost sheep of the House of Israel" and not to the pagans. The woman continues to insist and, at this point, Jesus puts her to the test, citing a proverb: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs". Jesus' answer seems cruel. But Jesus is simply clearly affirming the traditional Jewish approach to salvation which was "for the Jews first". And right away, the woman responds: "Ah yes, Sir; but even house-dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master's table. The implication of the woman's clever reply is that dogs indeed are fed and satisfied, that is to say that Gentiles as well as Jews are loved, fed, healed and set free by God.

This response of the Canaanite mother shows that she went to Jesus because not only she had a certain knowledge of Jesus – she addressed Him as: "Son of David" –, but she also had a certain admiration for Jesus, a degree of faith in Him. She had perceived in Jesus the goodness of God who is open to the needs of all his children, all those whom He created out of love. Her faith touches Jesus' heart and provokes his words of admiration: "Woman, you have great faith! Let your wish be granted." What is this kind of faith that Jesus qualifies as great? This great faith is the faith of those who don't hesitate to bring their own story, marked most of the time by wounds, suffering and pain to the Lord's feet, asking Him to heal them.

The great faith of this pagan woman enlarges or at least accelerates the mission of Jesus: It is true that Jesus was sent first to Israel, but not only to Israel. He was also sent to the Gentiles, all those who were created out of Love by God. Israel was the people chosen by God to reveal his salvation to the whole world. God pitched his tent in a particular place, among a particular people, the people of Israel, in order to reveal himself, through Israel, to the whole world, to the universal world.

Dear brothers and sisters, each one of us has his or her own story, and it is not always a "glorious" story or a clean story... Very often it is a difficult story with a lot of pain, many misfortunes, some time much sin. What do we do with our story? Do we hide it? Alas, this is so often what we do. We bury it. We don't speak of it to God or to anybody else. To follow that course of action is to take is a way of death.

The way of life for us is to bring our story before the Lord in prayer: “Sir, Son of David, take pity on me!”, “If you want it, you can heal me.” This is what this Canaanite woman, this pagan woman, this wonderful mother teaches us: Her example gives us the courage to bring our own painful story before God so that it may touch God’s tenderness.

Let us try to put into practice this gospel passage at the heart of which stands the Canaanite woman’s prayer. Let us think of our own story. There are always details in our story of which we are not proud. Let us go to Jesus, let us knock on His heart and say to Him: “Jesus, Son David, take pity on me. If you want to, you can heal me”! We can do this if we are aware, or better still, if we believe that the loving and saving presence of Jesus is always with us, within us, beside us, if we believe that Jesus’ healing presence is for ever offered to us. We can do it if we understand that Jesus’ heart is a heart that feels com-compassion, that is to say a heart that bears our pain, aware of our mistakes and our failures. Jesus’ heart loves us as we are. We don’t need to be perfect to be loved by Jesus. “Lord, Son of David, take pity on me! If you want to, you can heal me”. Let us allow Jesus to look at us and tell us: of course, I want it: be healed. To turn to Jesus is the way for us to be healed.

Let us ask the Lord to increase our faith in the forgiving, healing and saving presence of God by our side. Let us ask the Lord to deliver us from shame and guilt.