**Homily for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

**August 16, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 (My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 67 (O God, let all the nations praise you!)*

*Second Reading: Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 (All have disobeyed, and all have received mercy.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28 (Don’t throw the children’s food to the dogs.)*

In the beautiful prophecy from Isaiah that we heard today, the Lord welcomes foreigners to the newly reconstructed Temple in Jerusalem. He says that it shall be called “a house of prayer for *all peoples*.” Isn’t that marvelous! Perhaps the experience of being exiled in a foreign land, where *their* religion was considered heretical and *their* culture considered inferior, might have given the Jewish people a new perspective on foreigners. Maybe they had remembered that their Law once commanded their ancestors in the desert to treat the alien among them with respect and dignity, for they were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I *wish* that were true, but it’s not.

Temple Mount in Jerusalem was strictly segregated. All the sacrifices and worship took place in the *inner* courtyard of the Temple, which was restricted to Jews *only*. Gentiles, who were considered unclean, had to stay in the *outer* courtyard, lest they pollute the Temple and the Jewish worshippers with their presence. The Temple was to be a house of prayer not for *all peoples*, but only for those people who “join themselves to the Lord” by converting to Judaism. The conditions set forth in Isaiah’s prophecy are that they must honor the Sabbath and hold to the Lord’s covenant with his chosen people, presenting their burnt offerings and sacrifices according to the Mosaic Law. In other words, they must abandon their own religion and culture and become Jewish. *Only then* would they be considered children of God, and not filthy dogs. This was the prevailing attitude among Jews well into the Christian era. We even see it reflected in the way Jesus responds to the Canaanite woman, casually tossing out a racial slur at her and her daughter.

Jesus’ remark about serving the children before the dogs expresses the attitude of a typical Jewish man of his day toward Gentiles, but it also expresses a typical Jewish understanding of how salvation was supposed to work. The Lord had promised to send a Messiah *for the Chosen People*. And so, Jews felt that if foreigners, like this Canaanite woman and her family, wanted to share in the Lord’s blessings, then they needed to convert to Judaism *first*. They had to become children of the household if they wanted to be included. The Canaanite woman knows how the Jews look down upon her and her people, but she also has a snappy comeback for Jesus. A loving family does not neglect the needs of their dogs until after the family has finished their meal. They will toss some scraps to the dogs even while the children are still eating at the table. So, why can’t Jesus take a moment to heal her daughter, while he’s teaching and healing all the Jews in her town? Apparently, that insight, and the strong faith that this woman demonstrated, caused Jesus to rethink his strategy of ministering only to Jews. Perhaps, there was no need to restrict his outreach just to the lost sheep of Israel. He could include others who were *even more lost*, because they had never belonged to God’s flock in the first place.

As Christianity spread, and the Christian Church became more Gentile than Jewish, the relationship between these two groups had to be reconsidered. Many Jewish Christians still felt that Jesus was *their* Messiah, and that Gentiles had no legitimate claim on him. Gentiles had no part in the covenant between God and his chosen people. They were “foreigners,” both culturally and religiously. And, yet, they believed in Jesus, and claimed him as *their* Savior, too. Even without the benefit of the long religious tradition which was the birthright of every Jew, Gentile Christians had been granted the same gift of faith, and the same gift of the Spirit. Hence, they deserved to be treated as *equals* in the Christian community.

In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul looks deeper into this mystery and sees a fundamental common ground that links Jews and Gentiles, despite their different paths to Christian faith and salvation. Both were trapped in disobedience, so that they could receive God’s mercy. For the Gentiles, disobedience was a consequence of their pagan upbringing. They did not know God until they came to know Christ and his mercy. For the Jews, disobedience was a consequence of not recognizing Jesus as their Messiah. Once they came to see him for who he is, they also received mercy. So, even though the two groups came from totally different backgrounds and religious traditions, they were equal in their disobedience and in God’s mercy towards them.

This first-century controversy may seem purely academic to us today, since the Church is now almost entirely Gentile. We can’t imagine being considered *dogs*, rather than children of God, just because our ancestors weren’t Jewish. And that may be unfortunate for us. It’s harder to empathize with those who experience oppression and discrimination if we have never felt that scorn ourselves. If we have always been on the side of the *children*, and never on the side of the *dogs*, then we may not recoil instinctively, *as we should*, when one group in our society says to another, “You don’t deserve what we have, because our group had it first.”

We can see that attitude very clearly in our nation’s immigration policies, in segregationist housing policies, in efforts to suppress voting among minorities, and in discriminatory banking practices, just to name a few examples. The messages sent and received in all of these situations closely resemble what Jesus said to that Canaanite woman. “You don’t deserve to live in our country or to acquire the full rights of citizenship, which we were granted as a birthright.” “You don’t deserve to live in our neighborhood, because the presence of your kind will make our home values fall.” “You don’t deserve to have easy access to voting, because you people will dilute our political power.” “You don’t deserve the same access to capital that we enjoy, because we were born into greater wealth.” These are all ways in which we Americans say to one another, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”

That statement was wrong and offensive when Jesus said it, and it’s just as wrong and offensive when we say it, or when we allow our government or any of our institutions to say it. So, let’s *stop* allowing some members of our society to be treated like dogs, and insist that *all people* be treated like children of the household.