

Homily of Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, 2026

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67:2-8; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

The first reading took place when the Israelites returned from the Babylonian captivity and rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem. Through Prophet Isaiah, God commanded the Israelites, “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; and hold fast to my covenant; them I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” By this command, God communicated to the Israelites the universality of salvation and his rejection of the discrimination against the Gentiles.

In the second reading, St. Paul, although a Jew, was an apostle to the Gentiles. He states that God’s call to reconciliation and his mercy are for all; Jews and Gentiles. He writes in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Salvation is not a prerogative of any special group of people, but for all peoples.

In the gospel, the Canaanite woman did not mind the enmity between the Canaanites and the Jews or the disparagement of the Canaanites by the Jews. She made her way to see Jesus to present her case. Her daughter was tormented by a demon. Although Jesus tested the faith of the woman, more importantly, he wanted the encounter to be a teaching moment for his disciples and the Jews. Jesus did not say a word when the woman prayed to him. The disciples reacted, “Send her away, for she is calling after us.” Jesus responded, “I was sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Jesus reechoed the Jewish belief that the Messiah was going to come to save only the Jews.) “It is not right to take the food for children and throw it to the dogs.” (Jews used the term “dogs” as a slang for Gentiles to signify ritual impurity or a separation from God’s covenant.)

Jesus’ response did not discourage the woman. She persisted in her pleading, “Please Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their master.” Jesus was amazed and exclaimed, “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. By attending to the woman, Jesus cancelled the erroneous Jewish belief that the Gentiles were outsiders who were separated from salvation and God’s covenant. By attending to the woman, Jesus implied that the derogatory remark against the Gentiles was nullified and withdrawn.

The Canaanite woman has a few lessons to teach us. First, is her unwavering faith in Jesus, although she was a non-Jew. She believed that Jesus would heal her daughter. Nothing could discourage her. Second, she persisted in her prayer. She did not stop until her prayer was granted. Third, she was not deterred by what people thought of her or said about her. She remained focused on her goal. Fourth, she displayed great humility.

Today’s gospel maintains the theme of the first and second readings, that God is the creator and father of all, and that Jesus came to save everyone. Jesus came to break down dividing walls of enmity between races and destroy hostility of separation (Ephesians 2:14).

The disciples said to Jesus, “Send her away, for she is calling out after us.” We hear this same kind of hate speech against fellow human beings: “Send them away, they don’t look like us.” “Send them away. They don’t speak like us.” “Send them away. Their religion is different.” “Send them away. They are taking our jobs.” “Send them away. They don’t belong to our party.” “Send them away. They will overtake us.” “Send

them away. They don't reason like us." "Send them away. They don't agree with us." "Send them away. They don't support us." "Send them away ..."

Is there someone calling after us for help whom we have neglected or dismissed? Is there someone we disrespect or disdain because he or she is different, or because he or she is not one of our own? Is there someone we want to be sent away or be displaced because we are envious or jealous, or we just do not like the person?

We pray for a change of heart of perpetrators of the evils of discrimination of others, rejection of others, killing of others, destruction of property, sponsors and implementers of injustice, and enablers of conflicts, violence, and wars. Jesus prays for us and the world that we may be one (John 17:21); one in our homes, in our church, in our communities, in our society, in our country, and in our world.

We pray with Pope Leo: "... give us the courage to build bridges where the world raises up boundaries. In this time afflicted by conflict and division, intercede for us so that we may become peacemakers: unarmed and disarming witnesses of the peace that comes from Christ. Amen." (Jubilee Year Prayer of Pope Leo XIX)

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP