

20th Sunday (A)

20th August 2023

'Foreigners have attached themselves to the Lord'

Is 56: I will bring foreigners to my holy mountain Ps 66: May ... the ends of the earth revere Him
Rom 11: Israel's disobedience, and pagan obedience.
Mt 15: 21–28: cure of Canaanite woman.

One of the sheer joys of being a Catholic — the true 'world religion' — is the possibility of being almost anywhere in the world, and being able to find the Church at work, the Mass being celebrated, the faith being taught. When I was abroad at WYD recently, we were able to experience celebrating Mass with Catholics of many different races, nations and languages. In fact, I think that it is one of the greatest lessons of WYD, this encounter with young people from the world over who make up the Church: it is an eye-opener, and mind-expanding, and faith-strengthening, truly to witness this at first hand. It is such an important experience, I think, to go beyond the narrow confines of one's own local Catholicism, and to understand the world-wide nature of the Catholic Church; to see how Christ Himself is the *universal* Saviour; and how He comes to be adored in faith *in each and every single culture*. Jesus is

never confined to any one culture: His true message is applicable to all mankind.

But how do we square this with the Gospel passage today, with Jesus's apparent rudeness, and refusal to turn to the foreign woman? Jesus's initial comment makes reference to the fact that His mission was principally to the Jewish people. Of course, Christ's coming did not happen in a vacuum: it was deliberately preceded by, and prepared for by, the revelation of God to Israel over many centuries. Christ's coming only made sense as a logical extension of, and as a fulfilment of, the history of Israel. Outside that context (the expectation of the Messiah) it would have been as if God were having to begin again from scratch, almost as if he'd made a mistake, a false start. But in fact the history of Israel, from Abraham, through Moses and the kings and prophets, forms one continuous plan with the coming of Jesus, and the Church to which we belong. Jesus was expected by the Jewish people — as Messiah — even if not all of them recognized Him. His teaching followed on from the teachings of Moses, even where He

applied corrections and a challenge to ‘go further.’ The traces of the sacraments are also there in typical Jewish practices — think of the various anointings; the Mass, prefigured by the Jewish Passover; or baptism, already practised by John the Baptist.

So, when Jesus at first resists the pleas of the Canaanite woman, it is because His first priority has to be with the people who will understand His mission, and His presence as Messiah. Nevertheless, He acknowledges that *faith comes above all other things*. Her faith in Him, drawn from the faith of those who accompanied Jesus, was so strong, that Jesus drew her into the circle of believers whose lives He touched. And this is one of the indications that from Jesus, in the heart of the Jewish people, faith in Christ would spread out to the non-Jewish people. This is what the apostles quickly achieved in the decades after the resurrection.

But even in the Old Testament there were already hints of this: that the faith of the people of Abraham would one day be opened up to the world. In the 1st Reading,

Isaiah predicts just this, that the graces of Abraham’s people would one day be extended to the ‘foreigners’ ... *“Foreigners who have attached themselves to the Lord”* were not in any way to be excluded from the blessings of being the people of God. So, whilst there were strongly negative elements which kept others at bay (think of the Samaritan woman at the well), yet at the same time the *true prophetic tradition* always looked at the wider picture: it couldn’t see how the true faith could be restricted and denied to others.

St Paul, from the beginning, took this to heart. As we heard in the 2nd reading, he addresses himself to the pagans, opening up the Gospel to them. In each place where he preached, he went first to the Jews, to their synagogues, but especially if they did not welcome the Gospel, then he went to the Gentiles. This was a strong decision in the early Church, one of many key decisions in which the programme of God’s revelation was made the most important thing; not the cultural conditions. The apostles (not just St Paul, but St Peter and the others) came

to see that the Jewish people held a special and irreplaceable role in God's plan, but that this was not the last word: it was a passing phase, and faith in Jesus was not to be restricted, but instead offered to all. *The Catholic Church is the manifestation of that*: a universal Church of all nations, all cultures, all time, in which the Son of God can speak and can come to save the whole world.

I think that living in a big cosmopolitan city such as London, and especially gathering as we do each Sunday in a student chaplaincy, helps us to appreciate this already. Maybe we have come here from other parts of the UK — or from other parts of the world — where all our fellow Catholics are culturally or racially rather similar. And then we arrive here at university — and at Newman House chaplaincy — and discover students, and young Catholics, from all sorts of races, backgrounds, and languages. Yet, here at prayer, here at Mass, at the altar, we are all one, all the same, brothers and sisters in Christ, and it is very unifying and peace-giving. The readings and the Mass texts are in English — maybe not our native tongue — and

the English Catholic hymns may not be so familiar to us, ... But that is secondary. As we kneel here in Adoration of Christ in Mass, we express a unity that is deeper than our cultural, racial, or linguistic differences. In fact, it expresses the fact that Christ is the only real unifier of mankind. As the only Son of God, unique and divine, it is in Him that humanity can find its point of unity. He is the only mediator between God and man, but also, in a way, He is the only mediator between man and man ... the unifier of men and women who desire universal harmony.

Let's rejoice in the fact that we have already found the purpose of our life, and the remedy for all the world's ills, and the source of universal peace, and it is Jesus Christ. Let's never be rebuffing the stranger, but seeing him or her as a brother or sister in Jesus Christ, even if that person doesn't know the Lord yet. The Canaanite woman of the Gospel, though seemingly to the apostles a stranger, an outsider, yet sensed that Jesus was the One to come to — so let's make that path to Him all the easier, all the straighter, all the more welcoming to those around us.