

## **20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT Cycle A August 20, 2017**

This past Monday Archbishop Lori led the invocation before the start of the Baltimore City Council meeting. He prayed for peace and unity, following the brutal display of hatred and violence in Charlottesville, Va., that had occurred just two days prior.

The Archbishop asked God to “give us the courage to excise from our midst anger, violence, hatred and bigotry, and the underlying sin of racism that is still so prevalent in our midst.”

He continued,” Bring about that day, O Lord, when people will cease to hate their brothers and sisters because of the color of their skin, or their religion, or their nationality.”

It so happens that this Sunday’s readings resonate with a theme of inclusiveness and solidarity among all people.

In our First Reading the prophet Isaiah says that the house of God has a welcome for all, and that salvation is open to all.

The foreigners who join themselves to God, the aliens who do what is right and just, will be counted as if they were part of the chosen people.

This was no doubt a challenging message for a people who were proud of their bloodline and their national and ethnic heritage. They thought they were special.

After their return from the Babylonian exile, the Jewish people found many Gentiles living among them. They were interacting with each other and working together side by side.

There were two choices open to the people in Israel. One group wanted to purify Israel by expelling all the foreigners from their midst.

The message from Isaiah obviously represents the other view, that the one true God was the God of all peoples and no one should be excluded from coming to Him.

In our Responsorial Psalm, we sang that all nations find reason to praise the God who guides all people on the earth.

In our Second Reading from Romans we hear that St Paul is the special apostle to the Gentiles, so that they too may hear the divine call.

Even though he will face hardships and persecution, St Paul continued to spread the good news of God's love to everyone.

As a Jew himself, he continued to pray for the conversion of his own people. He knew that God would certainly accept them back, for God is always faithful to his promise.

And finally, we come to our passage from Matthew's Gospel where a distressed outsider seeks the help of Israel's healer and teacher.

Giving this story some context, the Gospel of Matthew was written for a Jewish-Christian community. It speaks of how Jesus came to save the lost sheep of Israel.

But there are some passages as well, that make clear that the mission of Jesus would extend beyond the boundaries of Israel.

One of those stories is this encounter that Jesus has with the Canaanite woman.

Keep in mind that many thought the Canaanites were a thoroughly corrupt people. Their presence in the land was believed by some to be a strong threat to the purity of Israel's religion and morality.

The mother's request was for Jesus to cast out a demon which the mother felt had possessed her daughter. She had such faith that if Jesus would only say the word, the daughter would be healed.

The disciples want to get rid of her: she is a foreigner and a woman. But she persists and having some knowledge of the promised Messiah, she calls out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David".

At first Jesus puts her off with some seemingly not very Christlike words.

Now it is possible that Jesus was simply repeating the sayings of his day, that the pagans were like dogs.

But against all the signs of hopelessness the Canaanite woman persistently seeks the Lord's help, even if it is to be only the crumbs that might fall from the table.

In the end, the reluctant healer is no match for a desperate mother.

Jesus has elsewhere chastised his own disciples as you of “little faith”, but here Jesus praises the “great faith” of this woman and commands that her plea be granted. We are told that her daughter is healed instantly.

An overriding lesson then for us today is that with God, and with us there is no insider and outsider. God’s embrace is universal.

The divisions and barriers that emerge out of our human experience have been shattered by the graciousness of God.

Exclusionary distinctions have no place among the people of God.

But regrettably they still are operating in our world and in our communities today.

The matter of how to treat people who are not “one of our own” immigrants or those racially different or of different faiths is still and ever-present issue. As is standing up to bigotry or racism in our own country or the enormous question of providing a good and just future for the Palestinian people who live in and around Israel today.

Pope Francis often speaks of reaching out to those on the boundaries or peripheries, to those who are driven to the margins and edges of society by poverty, violence, and illness.

In the end, it will be our faith that will lead us through the heartaches and demons that torment us.

It will be our faith that will overcome all our many biases and prejudices and give us hearts large enough to welcome everyone.

It will be our faith that will transform us. Just as it did for Jesus.

Archbishop Lori concluded his prayer by asking God to “help us to live together, work together and worship together, to keep each other safe, to look out for one another, to practice kindness and to experience across the lines that divide a real sense of human solidarity, for we are all your children, O God of love.”