

August 16

MASS

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Pope Francis wrote that “in the hour of trial faith brings light.” The terrible trial of a demonically tormented child could have wrecked the Canaanite woman’s spirit, weighing her down with despondency and defeat. But faith lifts her from the heaviness of hopelessness and carries her to the “holy mountain” that is Christ. The promise proclaimed by Saint Paul—that God desires to have mercy on all—moves the woman beyond the burden of fatalism and doubt. Even Christ’s silence does not dissuade her. Instead, it serves to steel her belief, showing her a new tack by which to beg for what God is eager to give her.

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

Ps 84 (83):10-11

Turn your eyes, O God, our shield;/ and look on the face of your anointed one;/ one day within your courts/ is better than a thousand elsewhere.

GLORIA

COLLECT

O God, who have prepared for those who love you
good things which no eye can see,
fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love,
so that, loving you in all things and above all things,
we may attain your promises,
which surpass every human desire.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity
of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

I will bring foreigners to my holy mountain.

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

56:1, 6-7

THUS SAYS THE LORD:/ Observe what is right, do what is just;/ for my salvation is about to come,/ my justice, about to be revealed.

The 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 to my covenant,/ them I will bring to my holy mountain/ and make joyful in my house of prayer;/ their burnt offerings and sacrifices/ will be acceptable on my altar,/ for my house shall be called/ a house of prayer for all peoples.
The word of the Lord.

PSALM 67

R/ (4) O God, let all the nations praise you!

May God have pity on us and bless us;
may he let his face shine upon us.
So may your way be known upon earth;
among all nations, your salvation. **R/**

May the nations be glad and exult
because you rule the peoples in equity;
the nations on the earth you guide. **R/**

May the peoples praise you, O God;
may all the peoples praise you!
May God bless us,
and may all the ends of the earth fear him! **R/**

The gifts and the call of God for Israel are irrevocable.

**A reading from
the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans**

11:13-15, 29-32

BROTHERS AND SISTERS: I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I glory in my ministry in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you once disobeyed God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all.
The word of the Lord.

Alleluia, alleluia. Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom/ and cured every disease among the people. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

O woman, great is your faith!

A reading from

the holy Gospel according to Matthew

15:21-28

AT THAT TIME, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon." But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her. Jesus' disciples came and asked him, "Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us." He said in reply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the woman came and did Jesus homage, saying, "Lord, help me." He said in reply, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." Then Jesus said to her in reply, "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.
The Gospel of the Lord.

CREDO

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

Receive our oblation, O Lord,
by which is brought about a glorious exchange,
that, by offering what you have given,
we may merit to receive your very self.
Through Christ our Lord.

PREFACE OF SUNDAYS IN ORDINARY TIME

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Ps 130 (129):7

With the Lord there is mercy;/ in him is plentiful redemption.

Or:

Jn 6:51-52

I am the living bread that came down from heaven, says the Lord./ Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Made partakers of Christ through these Sacraments,
we humbly implore your mercy, Lord,
that, conformed to his image on earth,
we may merit also to be his coheirs in heaven.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 56:1, 6-7
<i>Response</i>	O God, let all the nations praise you!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 11:13-15, 29-32
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom and cured every disease among the people.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 15:21-28

The 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us further into Matthew's Gospel with the account of Jesus' mysterious encounter with the Canaanite woman. This is a pretty well-known story, but Matthew's version in particular is difficult, because in it Jesus says some things that sound offensive to our ears and probably would have sounded offensive in the first century A.D. So let's look at his exchange with this woman. We will read the Gospel and will try to take some time to put it in its first century cultural and Jewish context, and then we will also go back and look at the Old Testament and how it is anticipating what Jesus is doing in this episode. So the Gospel reading is from Matthew 15:21-8, and this is what it says:

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters'

table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.¹

Okay, so what's going on here? Let's walk through it and make a few points and put it in context. Number one, notice where Jesus is, the geography matters here. He is in the district of Tyre and Sidon. These were Gentile territories that were to the north of what we consider the holy land today, in the realm known as Phoenicia. So they're predominantly Gentile, and it is in that geographical area that a Gentile woman, a Canaanite woman, comes to him and asks him to deliver her daughter from demonic possession — which is something that was very frequent, especially in the pagan territories. Now what does it mean to call her a Canaanite woman? Well if you recall, if you go back to the Old Testament book of Genesis, chapter 10, verse 15, it actually says that Sidon — that name Sidon which became a name for the territory — was a firstborn son, the firstborn son of Canaan, who was the great ancestor, in the book of Genesis, of many of the enemies of Israel, chief among them the Canaanites, the people who lived in the land of Canaan in the holy land before the Israelites came in and conquered them and dwelt in the land at the time of Joshua and Judges. So this woman isn't just a Gentile. She isn't even just a pagan. She belongs to the Canaanites, which of all the pagan peoples, were the most immersed not just in idolatry, but in immorality, and had a history for being the enemies of Israel. They were at war constantly with Israel in the Old Testament. If you want an example of the way in which the Canaanites as a people symbolized wickedness to the people of Israel, you can read the book of Wisdom 12. It just goes through all the various sins and immoralities that were practiced by the Canaanites, especially at the time of Joshua and Judges. Not only did they worship false gods, but they sacrificed their children to demons. It was bad. So the Canaanites were almost this living symbol of a wicked people to the people of Israel.

And yet this woman, who is a Gentile and is a Canaanite, comes up to Jesus and says "have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." Now what is interesting about that approach? This shows you first and foremost, this is no ordinary Canaanite, right!?

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

She's coming to Jesus and begging him for mercy, and using the title, the royal title, "Son of David" when she is addressing him. Honoring him, in a sense, as King, as Messiah, as the ruler of the people of Israel — which is a lot more than Jesus got from some of his contemporaries living in the holy land. Many of them rejected him, but this Canaanite woman recognizes him. Also, I might just note here, that the expression "have mercy on me, Lord" — *eleēson me, kyrie* in the Greek — is where we get *Kyrie Eleison* from in the Mass. When we say *Kyrie Eleison*, that expression — although most people think it is Latin — is actually Greek and it is from the New Testament. So this is a plea for mercy. Now how does Jesus respond to this extraordinary plea and this honor that the woman gives him? He ignores her, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't answer her a word. Now that is very mysterious, and frankly, kind of rude, right!? I mean it comes off as if he is being rude to her. If someone came up to you and gave you a title of honor and begged you for mercy, would you not say anything? What is Jesus up to here?

Now. Notice though, on the other hand, Jesus doesn't send her away. The disciples, when they encounter her, say "Lord, please send her away, she's crying after us." In other words, "she is annoying." They are getting aggravated by her. They are probably, frankly, a little uncomfortable with her, given the fact that she is obviously a Gentile and a Canaanite and she's coming and supplicating Jesus for mercy. Jesus, notice, on the one hand he ignores her, which appears to be rude, it appears to be dismissive, on the other hand he doesn't send her away, he just sits there silent. And then when the Apostles ask him to send her away, he responds with a mysterious saying. He says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Now what does that mean? Well if you look at that in context, this has to do with the fact that as the Messiah, Jesus is sent on his mission during his earthly life, during his public ministry, he is sent first and foremost, and only, as he says here, to the house of Israel. So although Jesus would go into foreign territories, and on occasion he does encounter non-Israelites, like the Gerasene demoniac, who was clearly a pagan, his mission, the people he goes to, the people he seeks after, are what he calls "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Now I could go into so much about this, I did a whole dissertation on this whole question of the 10 lost tribes of Israel and of the descendants of the northern kingdom, which were called Israelites, who had been exiled and scattered since the

time of Assyria, in the eighth century B.C. Around 722 B.C., the northern 10 tribes of Israel were forcibly deported by the Assyrians, they were scattered among the nations, and then the Assyrians settled Gentile peoples in the northern kingdom — those are the ancestors of the Samaritans. So there was an expectation in Judaism at the time of Jesus, that one day the 10 lost tribes of Israel would be gathered back into the promised land, they would be brought back into the promised land at the time of the Messiah, and that one of the jobs of the Messiah would be to gather the lost tribes of Israel, so that all 12 tribes would be reunited under one king, and then the kingdom of God would be established on earth. So when Jesus says “I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” we have to be clear here. Most of us think he means “I was sent only to the Jews and not to the Gentiles,” and that's partially correct. But what he really means is, “although I'm in Gentile territory, in the northern territories, Galilee, Tyre, Sidon, my mission is to gather the lost tribes of Israel. My mission is to gather the scattered sheep, the remnant so to speak, of those northern Israelites, of which there were some still living in his day, like Anna of the tribe of Asher. She was a prophetess down in the Temple. She's not technically speaking a Jew. In other words, she's not descended from the southern tribes of Judah, she's a Northerner, she's an Israelite from one of the tribes of Israel.

So Jesus uses this image of the scattered sheep of Israel to describe his mission, and we will see this elsewhere in the New Testament. If you read all the way to the end of the Gospel of Matthew, after the resurrection Jesus is going to tell the Apostles “now go to all nations...preach the good news to all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” That is the great commission. But he doesn't send them to the Gentiles until after the resurrection, because there is an order to salvation history. As St. Paul says in the letter to the Romans 1:16, “to the Jew first and then to the Greek.” In other words, God's message of salvation is first given to his chosen people and then through them it goes out to all the nations of the world, after the resurrection. So basically what Jesus is saying here is “I wasn't sent to the Gentiles during my earthly ministry.”

Now how does the woman respond? Well she could have just gone away dejected, he has already ignored her and then said he was only sent to Israelites. But instead she persists and it says “she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’” So she takes it up a notch. She kneels before him and it is interesting here, the

Greek expression is *proskyneō*. We've seen this elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew when the Apostles *proskyneō* before Jesus. But notice the English translation here is different. When the Apostles *proskyneō*, when they fall down on their knees before Jesus, the English translation is “they worshiped him.” When the Gentile woman *proskyneōs*, the English translation says that “she knelt before him.” So it is ambiguous. You could say here, you could translate it, given everything else in Matthew, that “she worshiped him” and said “Lord, help me.” Now either way, however you translate it, she clearly venerates him and begs him as Lord to help her and to help her daughter. Now what does Jesus say to that? He still resists and says “it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

Now in ancient times as well as today, this would be an insult. To compare someone to a dog would be an insult. You can see this elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, in Philippians 3:2, Paul is talking about his opponents and he says “beware of the dogs.” These were the ones who were insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation. In the book of Revelation 22:15, it says that “outside the heavenly Jerusalem are the dogs.” It's a way of referring to people who were sinners, who were unclean. And in this context, what Jesus is doing is giving a kind of parable in which the children represent the Israelites and the dogs represent the unclean Gentiles. So what Jesus is saying here is “it's not right to take the food of the children, namely the Israelites, and feed it to the dogs, namely the Gentiles. And if you think about this, if you have a dog in your house you know what this means. You don't take the food off the table — hopefully you don't — and give it to the the family pet instead of feeding your children. There is and order even within the family. Children eat first and then the dogs would eat the scraps that were left over, that was customary in ancient Israel. If you had any scraps leftover, well then you give it to the dogs. So Jesus is saying this is out of order. You don't take the children's food and give it to the dogs. You don't take the salvation that is supposed to come to Israel first and give it first to the Gentiles.

So how does the woman respond? Again she persists, she is not going anywhere until she gets some healing for her daughter. So she flips it around and says to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” And that's the breaking point. “Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed

instantly.” At that moment she is healed. So what is going on in this story? Well let me give you a little clue here. Two things. First, let’s go back to the Old Testament. If you look at the Old Testament reading for today, you’ll see that it’s a famous prophecy from the book of Isaiah about the conversion of the Gentiles. Sometimes Christians forget this. Sometimes Christians think, “oh, well the whole idea of going to the Gentiles and the Gentiles being saved was something St. Paul came up with in the New Testament. He tried to bring the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, to the synagogues, he was rejected in the Jewish synagogues, so he decides “Okay, well now I am going to go and bring it to the Gentiles” as a kind of pragmatic measure. Nothing could be further from the truth. That’s completely wrong. Already in the Old Testament, as far back as the book of Genesis 12, where Abraham is told that all the families of the earth will be blessed through him, as far back as the Old Testament itself, we begin to see an expectation that one day in the future, at some point, the nations of the world, the families of the earth, the Gentiles, the pagans, are going to convert. They are going to begin to worship the one true God. They are going to begin to worship the God of Israel. So the reading for today, the first reading, is one of those prophecies. It is from Isaiah 56:1, 6-7, and Isaiah says this:

Thus says the LORD:

"Keep justice, and do righteousness,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

and then it skips down to verse 6:

"And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant --
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer

for all peoples.

So notice here, what is Isaiah talking about? A couple of points. Number one, in Old Testament times, Gentiles were excluded from the Temple. This is very important to note. If you go back to the book of Deuteronomy 23:1-3, it gives a list of certain people who were excluded from being in the Temple, and one of those were pagans, non-Israelites. If you weren't circumcised you could not go into the sanctuary and offer sacrifice. You certainly couldn't act as a priest. And yet, Isaiah is saying here that one day in the age of salvation, when God's salvation is revealed, at the time of the Messiah for example, foreigners are going to come into the temple and they're not just going to offer sacrifices alongside the Israelites, it actually says they're going to "minister to the Lord." Now that word minister there is the technical term for serve as priests. This would have been mind-blowing in Isaiah's day to talk about a future temple in which gentiles will not only worship God, but they will serve him as priests. How is that possible? Well he says it's going to be possible because in that future age, God is going to make his altar and his temple into a house of prayer for all peoples. Now this might be ringing a bell for you because if you recall, Jesus cites this very text when he goes in and cleanses the Temple later on in the Gospel of Matthew. He turns over the tables of the money changers and he says "my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations" or "for all people's." That's a turning point in Matthew's Gospel that, in a sense, sets in motion his passion. What does it mean? It means that Jesus, following the prophets of the Old Testament, expects that one day the Gentiles are going to convert and they will become legitimate members of God's people and they will worship him, and they will even act as priests in this mysterious new temple of the future.

With that in mind then, if you look at the Responsorial Psalm for the day, the same theme pops up. The Psalm is Psalm 67, and the refrain for the day is "O God, let all the nations praise you!" And the Psalm, like in verse two, says things like this:

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that thy way may be known upon earth,
thy saving power among all nations.

And then again it verse 5 it says:

Let the peoples praise thee, O God;
let all the peoples praise thee!

So why is that the Responsorial Psalm? Well because whenever you see the word nations in the Old Testament, the Hebrew is *gōyim* and it literally means the Gentile nations, the Gentile peoples. Even to this day, Jewish people refer to Gentiles as *gōyim*, as a *gōy*. A *gōy* means a non-Israelite, a non-Jewish person. So the book of Psalms, once again, is anticipating that one day all the nations, all the peoples of the world will praise God, even the Gentiles will come to worship the God of Israel. So those two Old Testament texts, Isaiah 56 and then Psalm 67, anticipate what is happening, in a preliminary way, in the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. In a sense, because of her persistence and because of her faith, she gets to taste in advance the salvation that is going to come to the Gentiles after the death and resurrection of Jesus, and after the great commission, where Jesus sends the Apostles to the four corners of the earth to bring the good news of salvation to all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And of course especially with the ministry of St. Paul, who called himself the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Now with that all said then, I want to close with just a little bit of an insight from the living tradition of the Church, because one of the things that I've noticed over the years when I teach this particular passage in the classroom, is that people find it disturbing. In other words, they find Jesus's treatment of the Canaanite woman somewhat off-putting. It seems like he's being unnecessarily rude, unnecessarily standoffish, and it also even seems like he is being insulting when he compares the Gentiles to dogs and the Israelites to children. So what do we make of this passage? How do we make sense of the way Jesus is treating this woman? Well in this case, I would turn to the wisdom and the writings of one of the early Church Fathers — one of my favorite and might even be my favorite ancient Christian writer — St. John Chrysostom. He lived in the fourth century A.D. He was the Archbishop of Constantinople, a very, very influential figure in the early Church. He was an eastern Church Father. And in one of his homilies, this is what he has to say. St. John Chrysostom wrote this about Jesus and the Canaanite woman. He

said that she was an example to us of patience and persistence in prayer. St. John Chrysostom wrote:

Have you understood? When the disciples entreated him the Lord put them off...

Meaning, when he asked him to send her away.

...but when the woman herself cried out begging for this favor he granted it. And, at the beginning, when she first made her request, he did not answer, but after she had come to him once, twice, and a third time, he gave her what she desired. By this he was teaching us that he had withheld the gift not to drive her away, but to make that woman's patience an example for all of us.²

So what St. John Chrysostom is telling us here is that there is a spiritual meaning to Jesus' encounter with the woman. He isn't doing this to her in order to hurt her feelings or to insult her, he is testing her faith just like he tests our faith, in order to give us an example of patience in prayer. In order to give us an example of the fact that it's important to ask other people to help us, like the woman with the disciples, but at the end the day, we need to be persistent in prayer. And if we really want the Lord to answer our prayer, we need to not pray once and then give up, we need to persist even in the face of difficulties, even in the face of the apparent silence of God. We need to entreat him, be patient in prayer, be persistent, trusting that the Lord hears us, that he knows what is best for us, and that all things will work together, in his plan of Providence, to good for those who love him.

² John Chrysostom, *Homily on Phillipians* 1:18, 12-13; trans. in E. Barnecutt, pp. 116-117

**Jesus, the Canaanite Woman, and the Dogs
(20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)**

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7—The Gentiles in the New Temple

1. Temple in the Old Testament: Gentiles excluded (cf. Deut 23:1-3)
2. Prophecy of the future age of “salvation” (56:1)
3. Foreigners: will be brought to the Temple to “minister” as priests! (56:6-7)
4. New Temple: “a house of prayer for *all peoples*”

Psalm 67—O God, Let All the Nations Praise You!

1. May God be known “among all nations” (v. 2)
2. Let the “nations” or “Gentiles” (Hebrew *gōyim*) praise you! (v. 5)

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32—Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles

1. Paul: the “apostle to the Gentiles” (11:13)
2. Israel: the “gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (11:29)

Matthew 15:21-28—Jesus and the Canaanite Woman

1. Tyre and Sidon: Gentile cities in Phoenicia (north of the holy land)
2. Canaanite Woman:
 - a. Sidon: first born son of Canaan (Gen 10:15)
 - b. Canaanites: pagan peoples; idolatry, immorality, Baal worship (cf. Wis Sol 12)
 - c. “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David”
(Greek *eleēson me, kyrie*) (Matt 15:22)
3. Jesus’ 1st Response:
 - a. Silence: He “did not answer her a word”
 - b. (Note: he does *not* “send her away” as the disciples request!)
 - c. Sent “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 28:19-20; Rom 1:16)
4. Her 1st Response:
 - a. Honor: She came and “knelt before him” (Greek *proskyneō*, also “worship”)
 - b. Prayer: “Lord, help me!”
5. Jesus’ 2nd Response: you don’t feed the dogs before the children
 - a. “Children” = the Israelites
 - b. “Dogs” = the Gentiles (cf. Phil 3:2; Rev 22:15, dogs = sinners)
6. Her 2nd Response: even the “dogs” eat scraps from the “master’s table”!
7. Jesus’ Final Response: “Great is your faith!”; daughter “healed instantly”

St. John Chrysostom: The Canaanite Woman—An Example of Patience in Prayer

Have you understood? When the disciples entreated him the Lord put them off, but when the woman herself cried out begging for this favor he granted it. And, at the beginning, when she first made her request, he did not answer, but after she had come to him once, twice, and a third time, he gave her what she desired. By this he was teaching us that he

had withheld the gift not to drive her away, but to make that woman's patience an example for all of us. (John Chrysostom, *Homily on Phillipians* 1:18, 12-13; trans. in E. Barneclutt, pp. 116-117).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

1. Why is Isaiah's prophecy of a New Temple with Gentiles chosen as first reading for this Sunday (Isa 56:1-7)? Is God's plan from the beginning to eventually include "all peoples"?

2. What did you think of this story before learning about the Canaanites? Did you think Jesus' response to the woman rude? Demeaning? Does the Jewish background help make sense of their exchange?

3. What can this story teach us about the importance of (1) taking our petitions to Jesus directly and (2) perseverance and patience in prayer? Do you ever feel like God is 'putting you off'?

For Further Study

1. Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York: Image, 2009), See the articles on "Canaan" (pp. 135-36) and "Dog" (p. 222) for helpful background to this week's Gospel episode. The *Catholic Bible Dictionary* is an excellent resource that gives lots of helpful background on cultural elements in the Bible that need explaining. Highly recommended!!
2. Edith Barneclutt, *Journey with the Fathers: Commentaries on the Sunday Gospels Year A* (New York: New City Press, 1992), 116-17.

The Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 56:1, 6-7
<i>Response</i>	Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee!
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 11:13-15, 29-32
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 15:21-28

The twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time for year A continues our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans with a focus on chapters 9-11, which is the section of the letter that's focused on the salvation of Israel and the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles in all of salvation history. So, as I've mentioned before, this is one of the most difficult sections of all of Paul's letters, and it's a little tough here, because the lectionary skips a lot of it...so much of it that there's no way we can do any of it justice.

However, in the reading for today, the lectionary does take two very important passages that take place in Romans 11 and kind of fuses them together. So before I read them, I just want you to be clear. The reading for today is from Romans 11:13-15 and then it skips all the way down to verses 29-32. So these two texts are really both selections from the beginning and the end of the chapter that have been brought together. So I'm going to comment on them in that way. They're together, but they need to be distinguished here. And a lot takes place in between the two that isn't given to us. So this is just one of the limitations of the lectionary. The lectionary...to remind you here—this is important to remember—in a sense, presupposes your familiarity with the letter itself. And it's meant to be selections that can then be proclaimed and preached in the Church.

But it's difficult today, because there's so much going on in Romans chapter 11 here that I'd love to talk about. One of the most famous passages—which isn't included—is Paul's allegory of the olive tree, which has certain branches cut off and then new branches grafted on. That's what takes place in between the two passages we read for today. So I'm going to try my best to just focus on the verses at hand and see if we can shed a little bit of light on them. So let's look at Romans 11:13-15 and then 29-32, which says this:

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

Now skip all the way down to verse 29. That's where the lectionary picks up:

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.¹

Okay, so there's a lot going on here. The first point I want to make is this. Notice how Paul pivots at this section in chapter 11 and says:

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles.

This has led to a lot of discussion by commentators on the letter to the Romans as to the makeup of the congregation that Paul writes this letter to. So you remember, Paul had never actually visited the Church at Rome when he wrote the letter to the Christians in Rome. He's writing as an apostle who's on his way to Rome, so he's sending this letter in advance. And many commentators infer from this statement here:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles.

...that Paul is addressing a mixed congregation. In other words, that the Church in Rome consists of both Jews—in other words, Jewish believers in Christ—as well as Gentile believers in Christ. And it's not an exclusively Gentile congregation like, say, maybe his congregation in the Church at Thessalonica or the Church at Corinth—although there is some debate about even in those congregations, about whether there are a few Jewish believers or not. But it's clearly predominantly Gentile, where in the Church at Rome, you can read this as suggesting that there are both Jews and Gentiles, and that Paul is kind of speaking to the Jewish Christians in one section, and then he turns to the Gentiles and speaks to them here.

I am inclined to that latter interpretation for a number of reasons—one is that there's a large Jewish population in Rome. We know that from ancient historians...Greco Roman historians as well as archaeological evidence from the various synagogues in Rome. But also because it would actually make sense of why Paul spends so much time in the letter to the Romans, Romans 9-11, addressing the question of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles, between Jewish believers and Gentile believers, between Jewish people who don't believe in Christ and the status between them and Gentiles who do believe in Christ. It would make sense if he's addressing a congregation that has both Gentiles and Jews—who both believe in Jesus—that he would need to take up that question of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles.

But again, we don't know for certain, and there's a lot of debate about it. In any case, Paul explicitly addresses the verses he's now writing to the Gentiles. In that context, he says:

Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles...

Pause there. What does that mean? Remember, although Paul—in the Acts of the Apostles, for example—always goes to the synagogue first and then he goes to the Gentiles, he does see himself as having a specific mission of bringing the Gospel to

the pagan peoples of the world. And you can actually see this in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

So if you just hop over to Galatians for just a minute, to Galatians 2:7-9, listen to these words, and I want you to get a sense of what's going on...or what's behind Paul's statement in Romans 11. In Galatians 2:7-9, Paul says this about his visit to Jerusalem. You might recall, there's some division about Paul's ministry, so he goes to Jerusalem to meet with Peter, James, and John, and have a discussion with them about the Gospel. Paul writes:

...when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles)...James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised...

That's the background here to Paul's statement. So when Paul talks about himself as the apostle to the Gentiles, he's actually reflecting the division of labor that you see that took place when he went to Jerusalem and met with James and Peter and John—the pillars of the Church there in Jerusalem. I bring this up because we don't often think of it this way, that just as Paul was primarily (but not exclusively) the apostle to the Gentiles, so too Peter and James and John were primarily (though not exclusively—think of Cornelius here) the apostles to the circumcised...to the Jews. So you had this dual mission that was universal in scope. The apostles were going to bring the Gospel to all nations, as well as all peoples—both Jews and Gentiles.

And Paul's particular mission was to bring it to the pagans, and Peter and James and John had a particular mission to bring it to the Jews—which by the way, would make sense of the ancient historical tradition that Peter goes to Rome very early on. Because as I just mentioned and as commentators have shown, there was a very, very large Jewish population in the capital city of Rome by the time of the first century AD. Many of them actually had been brought when Pompey

conquered Judea—earlier on at the end of the first century BC. He brought back many captives—captive Jews from Judea—and they populated the Roman city. That was one potential source for the large Jewish congregation and population and multiple synagogues that you had in Rome in the first century AD. So it would make sense that Peter would go there if he saw himself as an apostle to the circumcised, that he would have gone there ahead of Paul to establish the Church there.

And then Paul's coming on the tail end and writing a letter to prepare for his visit to this Church in Rome. In any case, that's a lot of historical background. I think it's fascinating. But the point is, when Paul says:

Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles...

...that's what lies behind his words there, his statement of his particular mission. Now what he says here is:

Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. (Romans 11:13b-14)

So what's that talking about? Well, that's Paul saying what I just said in his own words. Although Paul's mission is *primarily* to the Gentiles, it's not exclusively to the Gentiles. Paul has not cast his fellow Jews aside in his mission of bringing the Gospel. And you can see this with another quote from 1 Corinthians—another letter of Paul. So it's not in Romans, but this is the background. Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 9:19-22, about Paul's universal mission. He says this:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

That's Paul's missionary strategy. He wants to save everyone. He wants the Gospel to come to everyone. So in Romans 11, what he's saying is, I'm magnifying my ministry among the Gentiles, not because I've rejected my Jewish brothers and sisters, but because I want them to see the conversions that are happening among the Gentiles to make them jealous, so to speak—he's speaking a little hyperbolically there—so that I might save some of them.

So you see, Paul's mission to the Gentiles is not a rejection of his fellow Jews and of his fellow Israelites. That's the first point I want to make here, because again, there's a pernicious error that runs around out there...and has run around at least since the second century AD at the time of Marcion, who was one of the first great arch-heretics in the early Church. And what Marcion did was he pitted the Old Testament against the New Testament. And he pitted the God of Israel against the God of the Christians. And he said...he basically described the Old Testament God as a god of wrath and judgment and as a different god than the New Testament God.

And one version of that Marcionite heresy of two different gods has been, and I've encountered this before in certain students who will assume "Well, in the Old Testament God chooses the Jewish people, the Israelites, and reject the pagans. And in the New Testament, He changes His mind and He chooses the Gentiles and rejects the Jewish people." So it's kind of schizophrenic god who is capricious in his election or rejection of different groups of people.

And this is a common—actually, it's not just my students. Contemporary atheists will often have that kind of a view of the Bible—think of the God of the Bible as this capricious god who's just picking certain favorites among the human race and then rejecting other groups of people. That is totally, totally wrong and totally a caricature...more than just a caricature. It's an egregious misinterpretation of the Bible itself. Already in the Old Testament, you can see that God has His sights set on all the peoples of the world being saved through Israel.

And the same thing is true in the New Testament. Paul himself in Romans is emphasizing that God has not rejected His people, the Chosen People are not

rejected, because the Gospel is now going to all—both Jew and Gentile. It's not a reversal of the election of Israel in the Old Testament. But some people think that's what Paul is saying because of the next verse. So if you look at the next verse, what does Paul say? He says:

For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

Okay, notice the expression “their rejection.” You could read it in two ways. You could read it as them (meaning Israel) being rejected by God, like they're the object of His rejection. Or you could read it as them rejecting the Gospel or the Good News about Christ. In other words, they're the subjects of the rejection. And many people who take up that caricature that I brought up earlier would read it the first way. They would argue: “Ah, look, see Paul says that the Jewish people are rejected by God.”

But we know that's not what Paul means, because Paul himself—at the beginning of the chapter, Romans 11—says this:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!

Okay, so a little rule for you. If you want to know what Romans 11:15 means, it's helpful to go back to the beginning of the chapter and read it in context. So if at the beginning of the chapter Paul says God has not rejected His people, and then he makes an ambiguous statement about their rejection, then you've got two ways you can read it. You have to take the second one, meaning them rejecting Jesus' Messiahship, not God rejecting them as a people, because he's already made clear that that's not the case. In fact, he's emphatically insisted on that not being the case at the beginning of Romans 11.

So what he's talking about here is—what he *is* saying is—if the rejection of Jesus' Messiahship by the majority of the Israelite people meant the reconciliation of the world. In other words, if that becomes the catalyst, the springboard, for the Gospel going out to the pagans, then what will their acceptance of Jesus' Messiahship mean but life from the dead?

In other words, Paul here is laying the foundation for the common eschatological expectation in the Church—in the history of the Church—that before Christ’s second coming, before the final resurrection of the dead, there would be a kind of mass conversion or acceptance of Jesus’ Messiahship by a large number of the Jewish people. That’s where that tradition—if you’ve ever wondered where that comes from—that comes from in part from this verse right here...Romans 11:15.

So in Paul’s mind...in other words, what Paul is saying is, “If I’m the apostle to the Gentiles, I’m trying to get as many Gentiles to become Christians as possible so that my fellow Jews will see it and recognize and accept Jesus as the Messiah.” And in doing so, that mass acceptance of Jesus as Messiah will usher in or, so to speak, inaugurate the final coming of Jesus, the final resurrection of the dead.

Okay, so that’s the first part of the lectionary reading for today. And then after it, Paul launches into this long allegory of the olive tree, where he compares Israel to an olive tree, and he compares the Gentiles to wild olive branches that have been grafted on to the stock of the original olive tree. And if you’ve ever done any gardening or grafting, you know that this is a pretty standard thing that you can do. You can take branches from one kind of tree, graft them onto another tree, and they’ll grow into one. And they’ll actually be able to bear fruit, and they’ll make a new tree out of two different kinds of trees. So that’s the allegory that he uses there.

Unfortunately, the lectionary skips that, and I say unfortunately just because it’s a beautiful and really powerful allegory of the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ and in the new covenant. But the Church skips over that and goes down to verse 29 and picks up there. And it says:

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you...

...and he’s still speaking to the Gentiles here...

...were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience...

...he means the majority of the Jews of his day...

...so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

So the reason the lectionary put these two together is that Paul is kind of picking up where he left off with that earlier statement. What's he trying to say here? He's trying to explain the mystery of why so many of his fellow Israelites haven't accepted Jesus as the Messiah. And in Paul's explanation here, what he's saying is, it's part of God's divine providence, that just as you (Gentiles) were once disobedient—in paganism and all of your various cults, worshipping your gods and goddesses, and rejecting the one God of Israel—while they had mercy shown on them (receiving the covenants and the glory and all that stuff) so now they have rejected the Messiah and you are receiving the grace to accept it...so that God, in a sense, has made everyone equally disobedient so that He can have mercy equally on all. It's kind of a mystery—a paradox—of His providence of divine mercy. And it shows that no matter who you are, whether you're of Jewish descent or of Gentile descent, whether you're a pagan or an Israelite, that all human beings, every single human being, needs the mercy of God. It depends upon the mercy of God and the grace of God in order to be saved through the new covenant, which is in Christ Jesus. That's really the heart of what the Church is getting at here in choosing these two readings, these very beautiful readings.

So I'll close with two points from the living tradition—actually, three points from the living tradition. The first one is from the Second Vatican Council. And I just want to make sure I add this in here. In the Second Vatican Council, there was a document *Nostra aetate*, declaration on non-Christian religions, and the relationship of the Church and non-Christian religions. And one of the things that document condemned was anti-Semitism. And in that document, one of the classic features of anti-Semitism in the history of the Church is to speak about the Jewish people as a whole as being accursed or condemned or rejected by God. This is a staple of anti-Semitism.

In the Second Vatican Council, the Church rejected that and then quotes it again. So if you look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 597, it says this about the Jewish people:

...The Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture.²

So Vatican II is emphatic about that, because there was in the history of the Church a definite tendency to misinterpret Paul's words and to speak of the Jewish people as a curse, especially by certain heretical movements like Marcionism, for example, which were very anti-Semitic in the way they described the Jewish people. But Vatican II is saying the Jews should not be spoken of in that way, and in part, that's precisely because of what Paul is saying here. Because the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. That's the first point. So I just want to highlight that, because it is such a pernicious error that has plagued the Church in different periods of history to greater or lesser degree. And it's something that the Church in Her teaching has clarified and needs to be reiterated.

The second thing...at the same time, the living tradition has also pointed to the very same text here to highlight that according to Paul, there is still an expectation that at some point before the second coming of Christ, there will be a conversion or an acceptance of Jesus' Messiahship by the Jewish people at large. And this is a great mystery. This is one of the mysteries of Christian eschatology, Christian doctrine about the end times. So let me give you two examples of this. The first one is from St. Thomas Aquinas. In his *Commentary on Romans*, he looks at that line:

...what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

And this is what Aquinas says:

[G]entiles are the believers who will grow lukewarm [Matt 24:12]...

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par 597

And here he's alluding to Jesus' statement that before the Son of Man comes again, the hearts of many people will grow cold and lukewarm. And Thomas says that's a reference to Gentile believers—in other words, the majority of Christians, Gentile Christians.

...or will fall away entirely, being deceived by the Antichrist. These will be restored to their primitive fervor after the conversion of the Jews.... [A]fter the conversion of the Jews, the end of the world being then imminent, there will be a general resurrection, through which men will return from the dead to immortal life.³

That's Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, paragraph 890. And following on that, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in a very interesting section—paragraph 674—interprets Romans 11 the same way. Listen to this. It's talking about the second coming of Jesus, and it says:

The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by "all Israel"... "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" [Romans 11:15] The "full inclusion" of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of "the full number of the Gentiles," will enable the People of God to achieve "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," in which "God may be all in all."⁴

...*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 674. So that's an interesting point here, that the *Catechism* and the official teaching of the Church follows Thomas Aquinas in interpreting the reading for today's Gospel—I'm sorry, today's second reading—as a prophecy of the fact that somehow in some way unknown to us, before the final coming of Jesus, there will be both a mass apostasy amongst Gentile Christians — a falling away from the faith...Paul talks about this elsewhere in 2 Thessalonians. He actually talks about the great *apostasia* or the great falling away. At the same time, the *Catechism* is saying here there will be a great recognition by all Israel so

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans* no. 890

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* par 674

that God might be all in all, so that salvation will come to the Jew and to the Gentile alike. And this mystery of fulfilling Paul's words—which the lectionary didn't give us in Romans 11:26—he says:

I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;
“and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”

Very beautiful, very powerful, very mysterious—what Paul calls the mystery of all Israel being saved. And that's really what Romans 9-11 is all about.

Paul and the Salvation of Israel (20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32—Paul and the Salvation of Israel

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am *an apostle to the Gentiles*, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ *in order to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.* ¹⁵ *For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?* ... ²⁹ *For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.* ³⁰ Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. ³² For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. (Romans 11:13-15, 29-32)

1. Apostle to the Gentiles:

[W]hen they saw that *I* had been entrusted with *the gospel to the uncircumcised*, just as *Peter* had been entrusted with *the gospel to the circumcised* ⁸ (*for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles*), ⁹ ... James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, *that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised*... (Galatians 2:7-9)

2. Paul's Universal Mission:

²⁰ *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law.* ²¹ *To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law.* ²² *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some...* (1 Corinthians 9:19-22)

The Living Tradition

Thomas Aquinas: [G]entiles are the believers who will grow lukewarm [Matt 24:12]... or will fall away entirely, being deceived by the Antichrist. These will be restored to their primitive fervor after the conversion of the Jews... [A]fter the conversion of the Jews, the end of the world being then imminent, there will be a general resurrection, through which men will return from the dead to immortal life. (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans* no. 890)

Catechism: *The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by "all Israel"...* "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the

world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?” The “full inclusion” of the Jews in the Messiah’s salvation, in the wake of “the full number of the Gentiles,” will enable the People of God to achieve “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” in which “God may be all in all.” (CCC 674)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A)

1. What does it mean for Paul to refer to himself as an “apostle to the Gentiles”?

2. What does the *Catechism* teach about the recognition of Christ by “all Israel” before the Final Advent?

For Further Reading

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans* (trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P.; eds. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón; Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012).
2. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 11 (ed. Philip Schaff; repr.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994).