

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A  
Is 56:1, 6-7  
Ps 67 *passim*  
Rom 11:13-15, 29-32  
Mt 15:21-28

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St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn  
Saturday, August 15, 2020

✠ Pray for us, O holy Mother of God!

✠ That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

What are the promises of Christ? How do we become worthy of them?

In today's Gospel Jesus told the Canaanite woman, in effect, that she and her people were not worthy. And she threw it right back at him, saying in a way, "Sure, I'm unworthy, but so what? My daughter is sick and only you can help her. We *need* you. I need you." And it was as if a light bulb went off in Jesus's head.

One of the great big mysteries of our Faith is the dual nature of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Jesus the Christ is true God and true man. BUT he's not like a double-decker hamburger. There's no human part down below and divine part up above. Jesus is not part man and part God. There's no part of Jesus that is not human and no part of Jesus that is not divine.

That, incidentally, is why we call the Blessed Virgin Mary the Mother of God. It's easy to say that she's the mother of Jesus. But Mother of God? Doesn't that sound like a stretch? But if Jesus is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, and he is, then Jesus is God. And if Jesus is God, and he is, and there's no part of him that is not God, then Jesus's mother is the mother of God. Pretty mind-boggling, though, isn't it? Mother of God. . . .

I know, a lot of people shut down when they hear the word "mystery," at least in a religious context. They shy away as if the word were a "No Trespassing" sign. But the truth is, a mystery is an invitation to come on in, to dive in and never hit bottom. It's not that we can't know *anything* about a mystery; it's that we can't know *everything* about it.

Grappling with a mystery – whether it's the two natures of Christ, or the Trinity, or the Eucharist, or the mystery of suffering – a Christian has to develop a capacity for ambiguity. The Christian has to hold two seemingly incompatible truths in dynamic tension. In this case, that Jesus is 100% divine and 100% human. It's hard to maintain that dynamic tension, and our tendency is to focus on one prong more than the other. The four Gospels reflect this tension. Mark's Gospel emphasizes the humanity of Jesus. John's Gospel focuses on his divinity. We get in trouble when we focus on one prong to the exclusion of the other.

St. Paul provided an illuminating insight in his letter to the Church at Philippi, where he speaks of Jesus sort of putting his divinity in escrow. St. Paul said that Christ “poured himself out” in entering into human culture and human history, in becoming one of us.

To me, one of the most hopeful points in the Gospels – hopeful for those of us committed to following Jesus in our own lives – is the observation St. Luke makes at the end of the episode where 12-year-old Jesus left Mary and Joseph behind so he could hang out in the temple for three days. In the old translation I dearly love, the text says, “Jesus grew in wisdom and age and grace before God and man.” Jesus grew. . . .

Scripture scholars generally agree that Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan River was a milestone for him. It marked the moment when in his humanness he came to a fuller understanding of his identity and the meaning and purpose of his life. In today’s Gospel we see Jesus reach a further insight.

It’s not immediately obvious, but in this story Matthew is telling, Jesus was in a foreign country. Tyre and Sidon were outside Israel and Judah. Matthew doesn’t tell us why Jesus was there – perhaps he just wanted to get away for a while. But a woman from that country wants him to help her daughter. He ignores her, telling his disciples that it was for the Jewish people that he was sent. When she breaks through, he insults her. In calling her and her countrymen a bunch of dogs, he’s reflecting the attitude of his time and place. She doesn’t shrink away. No, she accepts the metaphor and says that dogs feed on the scraps that fall from the table. And Jesus marvels: “O woman, great is your faith!” Exclamation point. Wow!

Jesus learned something that day. He learned something from that outsider, that foreign woman. It was a flash of insight, an “Aha!” moment, about his calling and his ministry.

A dear friend of mine shared with me this little 4-line poem:

He drew a circle that shut me out,  
A rogue, a heretic, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in.

Part of entering the Kingdom of Heaven is recognizing that for God there are no strangers, no foreigners, no outsiders.

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In addition to anticipating the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, today is also the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Our liturgical calendar is peppered with lots of feast days honoring our Blessed Mother. Several of them, like this one, focus our attention on how in Mary, the first Christian, the first follower of Christ Jesus, the promises of hope and salvation were fulfilled.

In the case of the Assumption, we observe that we are both spirit and body. The ancient philosophers defined human beings as rational animals. Rational animals, enfleshed spirits – it's all the same. "I am the Resurrection and the Life," said the Lord Jesus. Those who embrace him are promised eternal life, both in soul and in body. And Jesus first delivered on that promise when he welcomed his dear mother into heavenly glory at the end of her life. Wherever and however they exist – Jesus by virtue of his Resurrection and Mary by virtue of her Assumption – they are enjoying eternal happiness together forever in heaven, both body and soul. And those of us who accept Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life have eternal happiness in store for us as well, in both body and soul. It's a promise.

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