

AUGUST 17, 2014 - 20TH SUNDAY IN O.T.

The news on TV, in the daily paper, and on the web is full of war, and violence, and refugees fleeing oppression. There seems to be no peace possible between the nation of Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas. ISIS is persecuting and driving out the Christians and other religious minorities in northern Iraq. Racial tension continues to plague the streets of our own cities. Hatred based on prejudice is a cancer within human nature.

In the midst of all this, we hear words of hope spoken by God through the prophet Isaiah: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." At the conclusion of the Book of Isaiah we read: "I come to gather nations of every language; they shall come and see my glory." And in the Book of Psalms, Jews and Christians alike pray: "Lord, every nation on earth will adore you." This is God's vision for the restored unity of all His children.

And yet, at the time of Jesus, the fulfillment of this vision was as distant as it was during the time of Isaiah. In today's Gospel, Jesus has entered pagan territory, the land of the infamous Canaanites who in ancient times sacrificed their children to their bloodthirsty gods. God had used the Israelites to crush the Canaanites, and now they were considered the lowest and most unclean of all the ungodly.

"And behold, a Canaanite woman came and called out" to Jesus. A pagan ... a Canaanite ... a woman ... just what Jesus needed! She cries out on behalf of her sick child. Jesus ignores her. The disciples urge Jesus to get rid of her. He replies that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. The woman bows low before Jesus, calls him "Lord," and pleads again.

It's hard to believe what comes out of the mouth of Jesus next: "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." We gasp. Did Jesus just call that poor, desperate mother ... a *dog*?

This kind of language is not characteristic of Jesus. The Gospels describe him as kind and welcoming, a friend of sinners and the poor. Moreover, we assume that Jesus knew he had come for the salvation of the Gentiles as well as the Jews, and that the Gentiles were not excluded from God's plan. So what is Jesus up to?

His words and actions certainly reflect the prejudices of his time. Perhaps he is waiting for the reaction of the disciples. Or maybe he is testing the faith of the Canaanite woman. She certainly lives up to the test, and passes with flying colors, so much so that Jesus says to her, "Woman, great is your faith!" and he grants her request.

This passage also had special relevance for the community in which Matthew was living and for whom he wrote. Matthew is all about portraying Jesus as the new Moses, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, David, and all the prophets.

There was, in fact, a lot of tension in the early Church between Jewish Christians and Gentile converts to Christianity. Some Jewish Christians believed that Gentiles had to first convert to

Judaism in order to be baptized. We are told in the Acts of the Apostles that Peter was at first unwilling to even enter the house of a pagan.

So today's Gospel was a powerful reminder to Matthew's community that prejudices needed to be overcome in order to fulfill the command of Jesus to go and teach all nations.

Today's second reading addresses the other side of the coin: Christians who looked down on the Jews. Last week St. Paul wrote passionately about his fellow kinsmen, the Jewish race, the Chosen People. He would do anything to bring them to faith in Jesus. This week, he describes his ministry to the Gentiles, "in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them." And he reminds the community of Christians in Rome that "the gifts and call of God [to the Jews] are irrevocable."

Christians have not always heeded the words of St. Paul. Persecution of the Jewish people is one of the sins for which, now Saint, Pope John Paul II, publicly ask forgiveness. We refer now to Jews as our "elder brothers and sisters," and all of the modern popes have spoken out strongly against any persecution of the Jewish race. Furthermore, all persons of good will are to be respected, and the freedom of conscience and religion is to be defended as a right bestowed on us by God.

However, the Church, always mindful of the demands of charity and mutual respect, believes that she has the obligation to evangelize all people. As the Catechism of the Church teaches: "To reunite all his children, scattered and led astray by sin, the Father willed to call the whole of humanity together into his Son's Church. The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation." #845

In today's world there are two opposite extremes equally dangerous to faith: persecution based on prejudice, and what Pope Benedict called the "dictatorship of relativism." We must reject these extremes, and commit ourselves to the more difficult path of respectful dialogue partnered with faithful witness to our Catholic tradition. Like the Canaanite woman in the gospel, we must be humble - yet persistent - as we join our prayers to that of Jesus himself: "May they all be one."