

Bible Study

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle A

Opening Prayer: (Sign of the Cross) Lord our God, you are the source of all wisdom. Help us to hear your guiding, encouraging voice in the words we read today. Help us to see every situation through your eyes. May our reflections lead us to know you better and to love you more. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Re-connecting Question

1. Whom have you found to be a person of remarkable faith?
2. If you have ever participated in Mass celebrated in another country or language, what was that experience like? What did that tell you about the universality of faith?

Commentary before the First Reading: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

While strengthening the bond of the Israelite community within itself, Moses taught that eunuchs and foreigners were to be excluded from the temple – in other words, from the spiritual life of the communities in which they lived. This reading is an excellent example of how humanity's understanding of God's will unfolds gradually. When you read this, include the verses 2-5 which will be omitted on Sunday. They will set the context for verses 6 and 7. They also foreshadow the future Church which Jesus would establish after his resurrection.

Read the First Reading aloud.

1. What did it mean for a Jew to “keep the Sabbath free from profanation”? (See Exodus 31:12-17)
2. List the 5 actions that God says he requires of those who want to experience his salvation?
3. Who, then, is to be welcomed in the temple and invited to join in the offering of praise and sacrifice?
4. Point out what was quite radical in this prophecy for its time, especially verse 7.

Commentary before the Second Reading: Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

This reading continues the themes of last Sunday's reading from the Letter to the Romans. Saint Paul's distress is that his fellow Jews have not been able to accept the truth about Jesus as he did. His logic in this section may be a little hard to follow. He is emphasizing that God has not abandoned the Jews; rather, the Holy Spirit has extended the mission of the Church to Gentiles as well, so that they might eventually lead the Jews to faith also.

Read the Second Reading aloud.

1. What human emotion does Saint Paul say will one day bring the Jewish people to faith?
2. Verse 29 is important. Who were the first to be called by God and given the gifts of the law and the Word of God? What is Saint Paul saying about those people with verse 29?
3. Which verse says, basically, that God gave humankind free will so that they would be able to experience his forgiveness of their sins?
4. Would you say that Saint Paul sounds optimistic that one day all Jews will accept Jesus as the Messiah?

Commentary before the Gospel Reading: Matthew 15:21-28

The theme of God's universal call continues with today's Gospel reading. This Canaanite woman may be the only person in all of the Gospels who convinced Jesus that he was wrong about something. Jesus consistently had maintained that his mission from the Father was to the Chosen People of Israel. However, as a Jew who was well-acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures, he also knew that God's call to holiness has always been a universal call.

Read the Gospel Reading aloud.

1. Which is your favorite line in this wonderful story?
2. How many times did Jesus reject her pleading?
3. Does the woman ever say that she believes Jesus is the Messiah?
4. Which comment proves her faith in his ability to help even a Gentile?
5. Would you say that Jesus was prejudiced against Gentile Canaanites?

Applying the Readings to our Daily Lives

1. Have you ever been the target of someone's prejudice? How did you feel? What did you do?
2. We all have some degree of prejudice within us. Think about a group against whom you hold some prejudice. What is the cause of that? How do you try to counter those feelings within yourself?
3. Who (an individual or a group of people) probably feels excluded from much of your parish's life? Try to look at this through the emotions and needs of that person, not through the perspective of your good intentions and honest efforts?
4. What could our parish (or you personally) do in order to ensure that all are included, regardless of race, culture, language, marital status, sexual orientation, or financial position?
5. Are Catholics better Christians than Protestants or Evangelicals are? Explain your answer.
6. The Catholic Church's official teaching is that it is possible for a person who has never heard of Jesus or even of the One True God to still get to heaven, provided that person has desired truth and did the will of God as he/she understood it. (*§1260 Catechism of Catholic Church*) What spiritual advantages does the Sacrament of Baptism bring which make it easier to know God and to do God's will?

Closing Prayer (*adapted from the former Alternative Opening Prayer for Masses on this day*)

Almighty, all-loving God, your care has reached out beyond the boundaries of race and nation, and called us into relationship with you as your adopted sons and daughters through Baptism. May the walls, which prejudice raises between your children, crumble beneath the grace of your Holy Spirit. May we grow to love you more than all else and to radiate that love to the hearts of all who live. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord. Amen." (Sign of the Cross)