

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

The name Isaiah means “Yahweh is salvation.” His book is the first of the books of the major prophets, majority being determined by the length of their writings. Although at the time of Christ the entire book was believed to have been written by Isaiah himself, more modern scholarship now sees three authors for this book.

The prophecies contained in the first part (chapters 1 through 39) of the book refer to the period in which Isaiah himself lived.

In the second part of the book (chapters 40 through 55), the scene changes. Isaiah now sees Babylon, almost two centuries later, at a point when the exiled Jews are in need of consolation.

The third part (chapters 56 through 66) looks at the return of the Jews just at the point when they are taking steps to reform their lifestyle in keeping with the covenant even though they are very exposed to foreign and idolatrous influences. By this time the Jews apparently have an altar although they have not yet begun to rebuild the Temple or the city walls.

Our reading for today comes from the beginning of this third part. The faithful are reminded of their covenant relationship with God.

56:1 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. ⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, ministering to him, Loving the name of the LORD, and becoming his servants –

Foreigners living within Palestine were granted limited rights and protections. Here, full privileges are extended even to those living outside the boundaries of the promised land. The omitted verses address the fact that even eunuchs will be welcomed. Eunuchs were refused admission into the assembly of the Lord (Leviticus 22:24; Deuteronomy 23:1) because it seemed improper for a person, deprived of the power of transmitting life, to associate with the God of life.

All who keep the sabbath free from profanation and hold to my covenant, ⁷Them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer; Their holocausts and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, For my house shall be called

a house of prayer for all peoples.

In Matthew 21:13 Jesus refers to the Temple as a “house of prayer.”

2nd Reading - Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

Last week we heard the opening verses of Chapter nine where Saint Paul laments for Israel which has failed to recognize the messiah. The remainder of chapter nine and all of chapter ten continue with this lament with numerous references to the Old Testament. He points out that Israel’s plight is not contrary to God’s direction of history, but that their failure is derived from Israel’s own refusal, and that this failure is partial and temporary.

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles.

The Gentiles are not to be presumptuous or haughty because they have accepted Christ, they have no right to look down on Israel.

Inasmuch then as I am the apostle to the Gentiles,

This is Saint Paul’s title for himself. He is apostle to the Gentiles so that the Gentiles can serve as the example in convincing the Jews. Although he is a Christian, Saint Paul still looks on himself as a member of the Jewish race.

I glory in my ministry ¹⁴ in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them.

“Paul evangelized the Gentiles of necessity, addressing himself to them and showing that the prophets had predicted this many centuries before. His aim was to make the Jews jealous and thus encourage some of them to come to salvation also.” [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 450), *Interpretation of the Fourteen Epistles of Paul* Romans 11:14]

¹⁵ For if their rejection

The rejection of the gospel

is the reconciliation of the world,

Israel’s rejection of the gospel has led to the reconciliation of the Gentiles to God and even the whole universe which was cursed along with Adam.

what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

Jewish acceptance of the gospel will mean for them passage from the status of death to life.

Once they are baptized they die with Christ and rise again in His new life.

29 For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. 30 Just as you once disobeyed God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,

Gentile disobedience was disbelief in God. The attitude of Jews toward Christ represents the same sort of disobedience.

31 so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may (now) receive mercy.

Just as Jewish disobedience has been a factor in the display of divine mercy toward Gentiles, so the mercy shown to them will be used toward the Jews.

32 For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all.

All, Jews and Gentiles, have as groups been unfaithful to God, who makes use of such infidelity to manifest to all of them His bounty and mercy – to reveal just what kind of God He really is.

“It is usually thought that those who have sinned badly by not accepting the promise of God cannot receive mercy if they do not demonstrate their sorrow, because those who have sinned badly cannot be forgiven without tears and wailing. But Paul shows that these things are not required at the start, because God’s gift freely pardons sins in baptism.” [The Ambrosiaster (ca. A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* Romans 11,28]

Gospel - Matthew 15:21-28

Last week we heard of Jesus’ walking on water after the feeding of the five thousand. This week we hear of his encounter with the Canaanite woman prior to his feeding of the four thousand.

21 Then Jesus went from that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

These cities are in Phoenicia.

22 And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out,

The Canaanites were supposed to have been driven out when the Jews invaded and occupied the promised land. She is not just a Gentile, but one who has always been an enemy of the Jews. Not only this, she has spoken to a man in public – she has broken two taboos.

“Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!

An interesting title coming from a Canaanite; she shouldn't be interested in perpetuating the Davidic dynasty and David was not known as a healer.

My daughter is tormented by a demon.”²³ But he did not say a word in answer to her. His disciples came and asked him, “Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us.”²⁴ He said in reply, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Jesus' mission to this point has been to Israel; He does not wish to exceed His divine mission.

²⁵ But the woman came and did him homage, saying, “Lord, help me.”²⁶ He said in reply, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”

A very harsh statement. He is quick to point out that He is here for Israel only at this point.

²⁷ She said, “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.”

The woman is quick to pick up on the imagery of Jesus' reply and turn it to her advantage, yet she does it without arrogance. Her bold humility gets the best of Him.

²⁸ Then Jesus said to her in reply, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that hour.

In all of the Gospel of Matthew, only she is said to have “great” faith. Jesus is generous in His praise and in His healing power.