

Homily for August 18, 2002
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7
Romans 11:13-15, 29-32
Matthew 15:21-28

We, like Jesus, can change our ideas and insights.

“I’ve only come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” says Jesus in Matthew 15. And, as portrayed in Saint Matthew’s gospel, these words are addressed to a non-Jew, a person regarded as an outcast by the Jewish community. These are extraordinarily harsh words coming from this figure of Jesus the Christ, who is portrayed so often as compassionate and welcoming.

Historical studies show us that there was a dispute in the early Christian community, an argument as to whether the Good News was directed solely to the Jews and not to others.

Very likely, this statement of exclusivity, of a mission only to Israel, may have reflected some of Jesus’ own thinking. He probably envisioned the in-breaking of the kingdom as so close at hand that the first responsibility was to those people of God’s covenant – his fellow Jewish comrades. It was not a long walk from that posture to some of the members of the Jesus movement arguing for exclusivity on a grand scale.

But what we witness here is also that Saint Matthew’s gospel is showing how the historical Jesus was also subject to the problems of narrowness and prejudice. Indeed, if it had not been for the complaint of the disciples, Jesus would not even have spoken to the woman. And then there is that marvelous persistence of this woman who, through her radical faith and intelligent wit, had something to teach Jesus.

This is hardly a lack of respect on the part of Saint Matthew. Rather, this is what one finds throughout this gospel: that the Christ of faith, present to the community, corrects the Jesus of history. Because members of that early Christian community believed that the Risen Christ was present to them, they could continue to meet issues and questions with which the historical Jesus had no occasion to deal.

We see this today reflected in the sexual abuse scandal. As I mentioned at another time, the Church is being taught by the world as regards this issue. The Church is being taught what accountability is, not at all unlike how Jesus was taught by this persistent and intelligent woman.

My prayer out of this gospel runs along these lines: “Lord, what did it feel like for you to come up short and to be surprised by a wisdom from a source you did not expect?” “Lord, were you embarrassed by not knowing

something you later thought you should have known?" We run up against this all the time in our business life and in our schools as we are educated – we learn, and we change.

Is this not also true in matters of religion? How does God relate to those and through those who are not Christian, or who have no faith whatsoever?

In the Eucharistic prayer we are using at this time, toward the end of that prayer in the remembrances, there is a wonderful openness to God's work way beyond any organized religion. There is a breadth, a sense of God's expansiveness and acceptance of all things and all creatures that is breathtaking and never ceases to move me as I proclaim it. The prayer ends in this way: "Lord...remember those who take part in this offering, those here present and all your people, and all who seek you with a sincere heart. Remember those who have died in the peace of Christ and *all the dead whose faith is known to you alone.*" And then the prayer concludes with these glorious words: "Then, in your Kingdom, freed from the corruption of sin and death, we shall sing your glory *with every creature* through Christ our Lord, through whom you give us everything that is good."

As I proclaim that prayer and hear those words, I think of every human being who has ever lived or will live, whose faith is known only to God. And I think of every creature imaginable – those as yet undiscovered by our scientists, from the smallest amoeba and sub-microscopic animal to the worlds beyond our kin and other segments of the universe – every creature – every creature – God is that open, and through Jesus Christ we can be open that wide as well.

Here is a wonderful passage from the life of Pope John XXIII. When he was named papal delegate of Bulgaria, he himself was the foreigner, the stranger in a strange land. His warmth, his greatness as a human being won over everyone. And this is what he said in farewell when he left for a new assignment: "Wherever I may go, if a Bulgarian passes by my door, whether it's nighttime or whether he's poor, he will find a candle lighted at my window. Knock, knock. You won't be asked whether you're a Catholic or not; the title of Bulgarian brother is enough. Come in. Two fraternal arms will welcome you, and the warm heart of a friend will make it a feast day."

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