

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 20th SUNDAY (A)

Isaiah 56: 6-7 Psalm 67 Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32 Matthew 15: 21-28

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Today's gospel is strange, don't you think? It is embarrassing too, since it seems to depict Jesus in an unflattering light. A desperate woman has come seeking help for her tormented daughter. Since she is a Canaanite, an outsider to the Jewish faith, Jesus treats her abruptly. First, he ignores her then, in the parlance of the day, refers to non-Jews, as "dogs."

If the story does anything, it certainly gets us on the side of the "under dog" – we want to cheer the woman on, "Don't give up! He'll give in!" How strange, to side with a petitioner, hoping Jesus' heart will soften towards the mother. It is not the usual stance we take when we hear a person in need invoke Jesus' help. Usually he is the compassionate one, eager to help those who exhibit need and faith in him. But not in today's story. Is Jesus really as indifferent as he first seems? What's going on here?

What will help us enter today's story is to begin by reflecting on our basic faith in Jesus. What do we believe about his humanity? Most of us, I dare say, were raised with a strong affirmation of Jesus' divinity. He is, we believe, the eternal Word of God made flesh. Less emphasized in our formation was an equally true doctrine of our faith: Jesus was truly human. We have to keep these two truths in balance. But we often tend to emphasize one side of the truth of Jesus' identity; we favor his divinity. What has been neglected, at least in my upbringing, is the equally important truth that Jesus was fully human.

So ask yourself: If someone knocked on his door, would Jesus know who was there before he opened it? Traditionally we would not hesitate in answering, "Yes, he was God and knew everything." Taking that perspective, we would approach Jesus' rough treatment of the woman in today's text by claiming that he knew all along what he intended to do and was testing the woman's faith. And the woman does have faith!

Her faith has pushed her beyond her usual boundaries. She is a Canaanite and so has left her homeland to go out to Jesus. Remember that the Canaanites were the

original inhabitants of the Promise Land and had been pushed out by the Israelites. The conflicts between the Jews and the Canaanites were ancient and the woman had taken a risk when she entered enemy territory. She had the courage to leave the security of the familiar to venture into a place of tension in order to get help from Jesus. It's possible that, in making the journey, the woman was acknowledging the priority of the Jews and their faith as a place to find a gracious God willing to help her. Her desperation and courage are shown in her going to Jesus unaccompanied by a male guardian – something unusual for women of that time.

The woman's faith is also shown in her persistence with Jesus. She is not easily dissuaded, even when Jesus refers to throwing the "children's" (the Jews) food to the "dogs" (the Gentiles). (In the original language the word Jesus used is "puppies," not the harsher sounding "dogs." We sense Jesus is open to the woman and has pulled back from the way his Jewish contemporaries would have referred to her, as one of the "dogs.") The woman insists she has some rights, even though she belongs to the "dogs" who eat the scraps from the table. She seems to be implying her belief that God will feed the "children" and the "dogs" – both Gentiles and Jews.

Jesus has just been criticized by the Pharisees for his disciples (and by extension, Jesus) not observing dietary and ritual cleansing rules (15: 1-20). He called the religious leaders hypocrites who only pay lip service to God. In contrast, Jesus praised the Canaanite woman for having great faith. One of the very people the religious leaders would have despised for their religious and ethical practices receives the highest praise from Jesus. So, who are the truly pious and observant in Jesus' eyes? Those who see in him God's gracious desire to heal, forgive and welcome to the table. At that table, as at our eucharistic table today, God serves the best bread.

The disciples were all too ready to dismiss the woman. But as it turns out she exhibits more faith than even they have, for she sees that the God Jesus proclaims includes all people, even those believed unworthy by the pious and observant. God doesn't count class or ethnic standing as an entitlement to God's favor. All people of faith receive and find a receptive ear in God.

Back to our earlier question: If someone knocked at the door would Jesus know who it was before opening it?" With a strong emphasis on his divinity and a lesser one on his humanity, the answer would be, "Yes, of course." However, in recent

years we have come to a renewed appreciation of Jesus' humanity through our reinvigorated studies of scripture. For example, Paul says that Christ emptied himself, "taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, *one like us in all things but sin* (Phil. 2: 6-7). In Hebrews we are told Jesus was "tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned" (4: 15). Again in Hebrews, Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered." After his parents found the boy Jesus in the temple Luke tells us he returned with them to his home, "was obedient to them" and "progressed in wisdom and age and grace before God and humans" (2: 51-52). From this biblical perspective we observe that Jesus, like all humans, did not come into this world fully developed and all-knowing, but like us he grew, "in wisdom and age and grace before God and humans."

From this second perspective we might say that when Jesus encountered the woman and heard her request, he was expressing his first intention: to preach his message to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But when he saw the woman's strong faith in him, especially after just being rejected by those who should have known better, the religious leaders, he then modified his mission plan.

The woman was a clear sign to Jesus that God's salvation was meant for all people and all nations – not just for the Jews. Today's encounter with the Canaanite woman shows a change in Jesus' human consciousness and his human understanding of God's plan for humanity. How does this change take place? By the woman's persistence and unwillingness to accept a narrow and restrictive view of God. She realized birth and religious origins cannot hold back the outpouring of God's love on all people. If we make God too small and puny in love we have not heard the gospel.

Thus, we have two general paths of entry into this story. One, with stress on Jesus' divinity, seeing his behavior as the all-knowing Lord who draws out of a Gentile the faith that will be preached "to the ends of the earth." The other approach views the human Jesus in an exchange that helps him grow in his mission towards all nations.

The early church, and even our present one, would struggle with the message of inclusivity being affirmed in today's gospel. Even after the resurrection some in the church thought Jesus' message should be restricted to Israel, even though Matthew's gospel ends with the risen Jesus' mandate to go into the whole world and preach the gospel (28: 18-20).

God has included us in Jesus' message of forgiveness and reconciliation. We didn't do anything to earn that inclusion, it was handed to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and we have accepted the invitation to the table where the food of God's reign is given us. Gathered at this table we hear the risen Jesus' mandate to proclaim the message to all.

Are there any people or groups who are automatically included in our circle of friends and church members? Are any overlooked or ignored? Whom do we consider superior?... Inferior and not worth our time? In other words, who are the Canaanites in our lives who are ignored or quickly brushed aside? Jesus heard the woman's voice and accepted her. Am I also open to the voices who call out to me for help daily? We are trying to respond to the gospel we have received by doing to others what has been done for us. Just as our God has listened and responded to us, so we offer a willing ear and respond to those who express their needs to us.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Gospel reading:

And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district [Tyre and Sidon] came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!"...

Then Jesus said to her in reply,

"O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

And the woman's daughter was healed from that hour.

Reflection:

Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees for his lack of strict observance of religious customs and traditions. He responded by calling them hypocrites who only pay lip service to God. In contrast, Jesus praised the pagan Canaanite woman for having great faith. So, who are the truly pious and observant in Jesus' eyes? Those who see in him God's gracious desire to heal, forgive and welcome to the table.

So we ask ourselves:

Who are the "Canaanites" in our society, those we would push aside as unimportant and second class?

Is it possible that in listening to them we might hear God be speaking to us?

Have I ever discovered God in surprising ways and in the most unusual people?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

**“Thus says the Lord: observe what is right, do what is just.”
(Isaiah 56:1)**

All of today’s readings speak of God’s love and compassion for *foreigners*. The Scriptures proclaim that God’s mercy applies to *all*. Our Popes and Bishops call us as well, to “*do what is right, to do what is just*”.

“The Church hears the suffering cry of all who are uprooted from their own land, of families forcefully separated, of those who, in the rapid changes of our day, are unable to find a stable home anywhere. We are called to work so that every person’s dignity is respected, the immigrant is welcomed as a brother or sister, and all humanity forms a united family ...” (*Pope John Paul II Message for World Migration Day 2000*)

In July of 2007, The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops organized a delegation that traveled to the Middle East on a fact finding mission concerning the more than two million Iraqis who have now fled their homeland and taken temporary refuge in surrounding countries. Its purpose was to see their situation first-hand, assess needs and service gaps, and make recommendations. The mission was led by Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, Archbishop Emeritus of Washington, and included representation from Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC).

Our Bishops said, following their trip:

“It should be clear to all that the United States is not only the country that by wealth and influence is best placed to assist the Iraqi refugees, but also that it must assume a large measure of responsibility for the events that have caused the refugee outflow. What was not evident to the delegation before the trip was the extent to which many refugees have been specifically victimized for their association with Americans.”

“More than two million Iraqis are now estimated to have sought safety in neighboring countries. When added to the two million Iraqis who have left their homes for other parts of Iraq and become displaced in their own country, the uprooted now comprise about 15 percent of Iraq’s total population – a terrible if unintended consequence of the conflict that began in 2003”.

What can I do?

Read, learn and have your heart broken by the text and pictures of the US Catholic Bishops trip to the Middle East.

<http://www.usccb.org/mrs/Trip%20Report%20on%20Iraqi.pdf>

Contact your senators and representative to ask them to support increased funding for refugees programs. (Capital Switchboard: 202-224-3121)

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:.....

Rodney Taylor #0472274 (On death row since 10-/23/98)

James King #0226428 (11/23/98)

Jeffery Meyer #0226428 (11/23/98)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **"FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS"**

"Liturgical year A," which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

"Liturgical years, A, B and C," reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com