

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Year "A". August 17/08

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

Introduction

A lawyer, a physician and an architect were stranded on a desert island without food. Just across a narrow channel however they could see another island with lush coconut trees. The problem was that the channel was filled with sharks. The architect volunteered to swim across for some coconuts, but as soon as he got into the water the sharks came after him. He scrambled out and the physician said he would try. However he had the same experience and barely got back to shore in time. So the lawyer got into the water. The sharks didn't bother him at all. He swam to the island, gathered some coconuts and swam back with no trouble. The architect and the physician were amazed, and asked why the sharks hadn't bothered him. The lawyer smiled and said: "Professional courtesy."

Today's readings show us that God is not some sort of heavenly lawyer who takes a narrow, legal view of who can be saved. God cares about *all* people. God wants *all* people to be saved. It's true that there is an order to God's Plan. The Messiah was sent first to the Jews, God's covenant people who were meant to be a light for other nations. But God's ultimate concern is for all people. The gospel incident was remembered for this very reason. The woman who came to Jesus was a Canaanite, an arch-enemy of the Jews. Her approach to Jesus would be like a Palestinian approaching a Jewish Rabbi in modern Israel. That is why Jesus' response sounds harsh to our ears. The point however is that Jesus grants the woman's request and praises her faith. His will that all should be saved is very evident here. I want to draw two lessons from today's readings.

We Need to Look Beyond our Own Small World

There was once a painter who was moving into a small community. He asked a local real estate agent about homes for sale. The agent mentioned one home that sounded right, but the painter asked: "Does the home have a view?" The agent said: "I'm afraid not. You can see Joe Smith's barn on the next road, but beyond that there's only a lot of mountains." Clearly that agent had a very limited idea of a view. So too we can become locked into the neighbourhood or region where we live and forget there is a whole world beyond them.

One of the ways in which Catholic social teaching has been really effective is in its emphasis on the principle of *solidarity*. We are not just individuals. There is no such thing as an isolated, unattached individual. Each of us is part of a family, part of a community, part of one world. People sometimes say that charity begins at home. Fair enough, but it must never end at home. Many of our parishes sponsor refugee families. They also provide generous support to such projects as the Share Lent Collection and the Save a Family Plan. This is wonderful. However as a country we also have responsibilities in justice to our world. For example, we must never lose sight of the terrible debt burden in the poorer countries, and the scourge of AIDS, especially in Africa. These are issues on which a country like our own has enough political and economic clout to make a difference if we as citizens and voters insist on it.

People also sometimes say “Keep the faith”. Fair enough, but we must also spread the faith. To be authentically Christian means to be missionary. The spiritual welfare of others *is* our concern. There are people who will only meet Christ through us.

We Need to Break Down the Walls of Prejudice

One of the great thinkers of the 20th century, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has shown how completely all of us tend to absorb the attitudes, and so the prejudices, of our society. We grow up with them, scarcely aware of them until some crisis brings them to our attention. The truth is that every one of us has prejudices, against certain races, certain classes, certain social groups. Yet the need for us as Christians to fight prejudice has never been greater. Thanks to television we have been able to see what prejudice can do: the unspeakable atrocities committed by Palestinians and Jews in the Middle East, by tribal groups in parts of Africa, by Republicans and Unionists in Northern Ireland, by religious extremists in various countries. Prejudice has no place in the heart of a Christian.

We also need to reflect on another type of prejudice closer to home. There is a mentality, always ready to show itself that feeds on prejudice toward the unemployed and those on welfare. I am only repeating what our Canadian Catholic Bishops have said when I say it is a classic example of blaming the victim. Governments or municipalities embrace programs like workfare that force needy people into low-paying, dead-end jobs because they want to believe that most people on welfare are there willingly. Yet every careful study shows this is not true. People applaud government hotlines to report welfare cheaters but ignore the fact that the number of cheaters actually uncovered is miniscule. As Christians and Catholics we should strongly oppose this particularly cruel form of prejudice.

Conclusion

Today’s Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 67, with its theme, “Let all the peoples praise you” is a harvest psalm. It sees every harvest as God’s gift to all people, and so as an occasion to celebrate our God as the God of all people, the God who wants all people to be saved. Harvest time is a particularly appropriate time to widen our horizons and to root out our prejudices.