

Sunday, August 16, 2020

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

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

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

Responsorial: Psalm 67:2-3, 5-6, 8

Gospel: Matthew 15:21-2

Making Our Homes a House of Prayer

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isaiah 56:7)

All of today's readings tell us that God's salvation is meant for everyone. The prophet Isaiah speaks of foreigners who will join themselves to the Lord (56:6). The psalmist declares, "May the peoples praise you, O God" (Psalm 67:6). Jesus praises a Canaanite woman's faith (Matthew 15:28). And Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, proclaims that God wants to "have mercy upon all" (Romans 11:32).

For the Jewish people in today's first reading, this must have been difficult to accept. They had just returned from exile to discover foreigners living in their holy city, Jerusalem. Their covenant told them that they were set apart as a holy people chosen by God. So how could "impure" Gentiles be living on their land? They forgot that God had chosen them by his grace, not just for their own sake, but to bring his light to every nation.

This call became increasingly clear in the early Church. Initially, all of Jesus' followers were Jewish. But as Gentiles came to believe in the Lord, the Jewish Christians began to understand that God's plan of salvation was far bigger than they had expected. Learning to live and work and pray alongside Gentiles could not have been easy. But they, like us, had to allow God's grace to help them love each other. The result? The diverse, beautiful, sometimes messy Church we know today.

Jesus wants his Church to be a house of prayer for all nations so that every person can belong to his family. He sees people who are searching for hope, meaning, and a place to meet God, and he is asking us to draw them in, to be the loving, welcoming face of the Church. May we always be open to everyone who is seeking the Lord, and through us, may God's grace flow out to the entire world!

"Jesus, help me to show everyone the love that you have given me."

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. The first reading from Isaiah opens with these words: *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.* It continues with these words: *The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, ministering to him, loving the name of the Lord, and becoming his servants—all who keep the sabbath free from profanation and hold to my covenant, them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer ... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*
 - What message do you think is being conveyed by the opening prophetic words of the prophet Isaiah? How do these words apply to the Church today and how you live out your Christian life?
 - The other words of the reading speak of the all-inclusiveness of God's love. All people are welcome in God's house. Are there any people you know who need prayers; especially for their conversion to Christ and their transformation into his image and likeness. Are you willing to include these people in your times of prayer?
2. The responsorial psalm contains these words: *“May God have pity on us and bless us; may he let his face shine upon us. So may your way be known upon earth; among all nations, your salvation. May the nations be glad and exult because you rule the peoples in equity; the nations on the earth you guide. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you! May God bless us, and may all the ends of the earth fear him!*
 - How do the beginning words of the psalm apply to you and your country? What areas require God to *have pity on us and bless us* and to *let his face shine upon us*?
 - What nations can you think of that need prayer and need God's blessing and the knowledge of his wonderful salvation in Jesus Christ? Are you willing to include those nations in your times of prayer? If not, why not?
 - Do you believe there are nations today that are beyond God's blessing and salvation? If so, why?
3. The second reading contains these words of St. Paul: *I glory in my ministry in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you once disobeyed God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all.*
 - What do you think these words mean regarding God's mercy toward the Jewish people and to lukewarm Christians? How do they apply to you?
 - Are you willing to join your prayers with Paul's and pray for God's mercy and for the conversion of the Jewish people to their Messiah, including any specific Jewish persons you know who need to come to know God's great love for them? If not, why not?
4. In the Gospel, a Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus: *Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon.* Jesus responses are as follows: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.* The reading ends with these words: *She said, “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.” 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.*
 - Why do you believe Jesus' initial responses did not seem to be sympathetic but went along with what his disciples wanted him to do? In what ways did his response test the faith of the woman and his disciples?
 - Do you believe that just as Jesus pushed this woman, so he pushes us sometimes -- in order to provoke us to deeper faith by challenging us to trust him even when we think he is ignoring us or rejecting our request?
 - How can reflecting on difficult Scriptures, like this Gospel reading, help us understand more and more God's desire to help us grow in our faith in him and our trust in his great love for us?
5. The meditation is a reflection on these words from the first reading: *My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples* (Isaiah 56:7). It ends with these words: *“Jesus wants his Church to be a house of prayer for all nations so that every person can belong to his family. He sees people who are searching for hope, meaning, and a place to meet God, and he is asking us to draw them in, to be the loving, welcoming face of the Church. May we always be open to everyone who is seeking the Lord, and through us, may God's grace flow out to the entire world!”*
 - In what ways have you tried to make your church a *house of prayer*?
 - What additional steps can you take to make your church a place where “every person can belong to” and a place for “people who are searching for hope, meaning, and a place to meet God”?

Take some time now to ask the Lord for the grace to reflect his love for us in the way we love one another. Use the prayer below from the end of the mediation as the starting point.

“Jesus, help me to show everyone the love that you have given me.”

[Maurice Blumberg is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He is also a current leader of his parish ChristLife, Healing, and Men's Ministries. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]