

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 21, 2008 at 4:09pm

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

The scripture readings today are very inspiring and also extraordinarily challenging.

When we look at the gospel lesson first of all, it's amazing, isn't it, the courage and the faith and the love of this woman? A Canaanite -- not only a Gentile, not a Jew, but also from the very people who were the first enemies of the Jewish people when they were freed from slavery in Egypt and came into the promised land. This is a Canaanite. They'd been hostile to the Jews for centuries, yet she has the courage to come forward, to cry after Jesus. This is a woman in a very patriarchal society. According to the custom, she should not have been in the street by herself. She should not approach a man as she did. But her love for her daughter was so strong and she wanted so much to get what was good for her daughter, that she had the courage to push beyond the boundaries that were supposed to hold her back.

She came forward and shouted at Jesus. First of all, her courage is amazing and she did this because she had this unrelenting, almost like a desperate love for her daughter. But then what's also very challenging is the way Jesus acts. Now he's acting according to the custom of his time, the culture in which he lived, a very patriarchal culture. Women had no rights, they should not be in the street, they should not approach a man. Jesus was acting within that framework.

It's so unlike Jesus, isn't it, when she cries out to him, silence. I don't think that ever happens in any other incident recorded in the gospels. I don't think you'll find Jesus having a kind of stony silence toward

someone in need. But then the disciples say, "She's shouting after us; get rid of her," and Jesus takes their request in a sense because he rebuffs the woman: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Again, that's not like Jesus, is it, to reject anyone?

The woman does not give up. She comes right up to Jesus, falls down in front of him, pleads with him, and Jesus rebuffs her again in an even more harsh way: "It's not right to take the food of the children (that is, the Jews) and throw it to the dogs (Gentiles)." That was a very negative term that the Jewish people used toward the Gentiles -- dogs. It's very difficult for us to accept Jesus acting this way, but he did, according to Matthew's Gospel.

He was acting according to his understanding of the society in which he lived and the culture of which he was part. But then what is even more amazing is how this woman, because she is determined, persistent and has such love for her child and has such courage, Jesus finally is converted to dialogue with her because after he had said "It's not right to give the food to a dog," she comes back at him uses a more gentle term than dog and says, "Yes, but you wouldn't deprive a puppy of the scraps that fall from the table."

Jesus has to take all of this in and he changes. He's converted.

This is really a challenge because it really puts us up against the deep mystery of the incarnation. Jesus is God, Yes, we know that. Our faith tells us that and we affirm that. But now we're seeing Jesus fully human. Fully human. He has to change his mind and that's how humans act when sometimes new information is given to us, When we get a deeper insight and when we enter into dialogue, we change. This is an instance where Jesus changes. What a marvelous change it is.

I think, maybe, as Jesus is dealing with all of this, maybe he does reach back into the scriptures to the place that we heard in our first lesson today, where the prophet at the time the chosen people are in exile has this vision of their returning to the chosen land. The prophet sees a time where foreigners have attached themselves to Yahweh, to serve Yahweh, to love God's name and be God's servants.

"These I will bring to my holy mountain. I will make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their holocausts and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house will be called the house of prayer for all the peoples."

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So there was this tiny glimpse in the Hebrew scriptures, which Jesus knew so well, of how God is going to bring all peoples together, no excluding. Everyone is included and called to be part of God's people.

"My house is a house of prayer for all the peoples."

The germ of what happens in the gospel lesson today is planted there hundreds and hundreds of years before and maybe that's what causes Jesus to say, "Yes, I have to remember how God would be revealed and God is calling all people."

He tells the woman, "Yes, your faith is magnificent. Your courage is unbelievable. Your love for your daughter is beautiful. She is healed." What a marvelous story, challenging, because of her faith, her courage, her determination.

Would we always act like that? She's an extraordinary challenge to us.

but also the challenge of Jesus, first of all probing more deeply the whole mystery of Jesus being fully human, fully divine, one of us in every way except sin, but one who has to learn and change.

Here too, is a challenge for every one of us. It's so easy to be set in our ways, to think, "I have the answers. I don't have to listen to other people." Well, Jesus shows us there are times where it's important to listen to other people, to try to probe the actions of people and see what they mean, and actually to dialogue, to change, back and forth, and learn, change.

That's true of every one of us individually, but I think there are circumstances in the church today where maybe God is calling us to a profound change and that is something that I think about this week because just a few days ago, -- a week ago now -- there was another ordination of a woman to the priesthood that happened in Lexington, Kentucky. Of course, automatically, the message comes back from the Vatican, from Rome, "They're all excommunicated, anybody who participated in this. Women cannot be ordained."

But maybe, maybe, isn't it possible that if we look back at our tradition, we remember, who were the first ones who recognized the risen Christ on Easter Sunday, the ones who would never run away and immediately recognized Jesus. They were frightened and so on, but they believed. Jesus sent them to be the first apostles to the rest of the community: "Go and tell the others that I have risen." They carried the message of the good news first of all -- women. Isn't that something indicative of God's will that women take leadership roles in our church? That women be the ones who proclaim the good news?

Maybe if we think about this, pray over this, and maybe within our church if we really entered into dialogue with women and come to experience how they experience "I'm being called by God" just as honestly and with as much prayerfulness as any man who was ever called to the priesthood. Maybe if we listen to them, look at their faith, the love that they have for our church and for the ministry, maybe if we engaged in dialogue, we would see that yes, God has planted a seed where women have a role of leadership.

We could acknowledge that today. We have to break out of the culture just as Jesus did, because we have lived in a culture where women have been disregarded, where women's rights have been denied, where they've been treated not as full human beings. That happened within our culture. It happened to the church when the church became so closely associated with the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was a situation where women had no rights whatsoever, and the church got caught up in that culture, perhaps ?

or definitely.

It's taken a long time within society for women to begin to have their rights recognized. And now it's time, I think, for us to reflect on what is happening in our church and perhaps we need to recognize women as full human beings, daughters of God just as men are sons of God, every one of us equal in freedom and dignity, or as Paul said in writing to the church at Galatia: "Among those who are baptized, there's neither male nor female, slave or free, rich or poor." Everyone is a child of God, equal in dignity and freedom with all the rights of every child of God.

This is a hard time for our church. We find it very difficult to undergo change, to enter into dialogue, but I think today's gospel really calls us to this -- each of us individually in our whole church -- and perhaps as we confront this gospel lesson with its particular challenges and the situation within our church today, we have to do as Paul did in today's second lesson. He was dealing with a problem that he really found very difficult.

His own people, the chosen people were not flocking to follow Jesus and that bothered Paul, yet as we heard, Paul could come to the point where he could say "I know they are the chosen people. They are still loved by God, loved for the sake of their ancestors. God never takes back God's gifts and God's call, God's choice, is irrevocable." Paul realizes that somehow, in the mystery of God, the chosen people, those that are God's choice are still God's chosen people. That call is irrevocable.

Now how do we put all of this together? Perhaps we close our reflection by going on in that part of Paul's letter to the church at Rome after the passage that was our lesson today, and we simply, in wonder and awe, proclaim as Paul did, "How rich are the depths of God. How deep God's wisdom and knowledge, and how impossible for us to penetrate God's motives or to understand God's methods."

Paul goes on, "Who could ever know the mind of God? Who could ever be God's counselor? Who could ever give anything or lend God anything? All that exists comes from God. All is by God and for God, so to God be glory forever, amen."

As we grapple with these mysteries that we reflect on today, the mysteries of Jesus, the Son of God, son of Mary, fully human, fully divine; the mystery of how we bring everyone into full equality within our church; the mystery of how we're going to, through dialogue, be converted and so on.

We don't know the answers, but with Paul, we simply say "how rich are the depths of God. How deep God's wisdom and knowledge," and we wait for the time for God to lead us where God wants us to go. We open ourselves to being converted, to being changed, and to make our church more fully what God intends it to be, a church where Jesus leads us, calls us and changes us, even as he was led, called and changed by God.

Pray that we can be open to the depths of the mysteries of God accept God's ways and God's wisdom.

(Bishop Gumbleton preached this homily at the National Shrine of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha in Fonda, N.Y., where he was a keynote speaker at the 10th Anniversary Kateri Tekakwitha Peace Conference.)

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