

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time -Lectionary: 118

Reading 1 - Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

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.

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; their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Responsorial Psalm - Psalms 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8 R. (4) O God, let all the nations praise you!

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

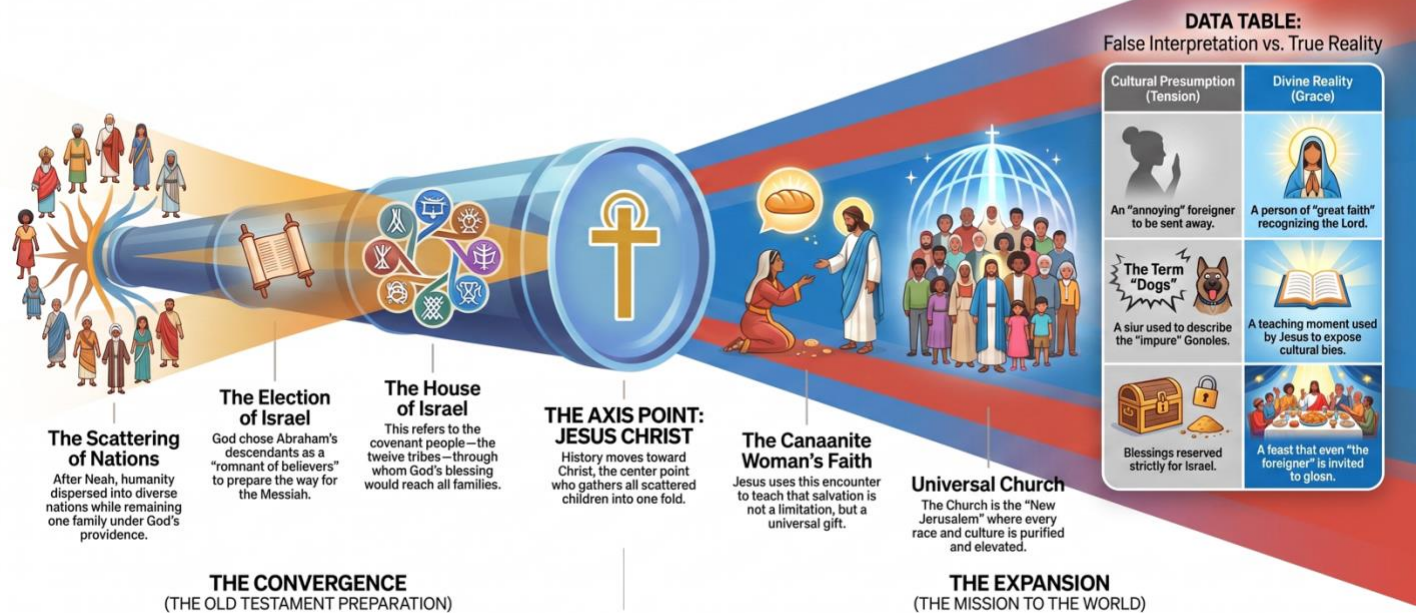
Brothers and sisters: I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I glory in my ministry in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

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.

Gospel - Matthew 15:21-28

At that time, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon." But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her. Jesus' disciples came and asked him, "Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us." He said in reply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the woman came and did Jesus homage, saying, "Lord, help me." He said in reply, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." 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.

The Great Telescope: Understanding the Path of Salvation



Gemini Notebook

Summary

The homily examines the universal direction of biblical salvation history, centering on the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon, revealing that salvation history can be considered as telescoping from the broad origins of humanity (Adam and Eve, Noah) into the person of Jesus Christ, and then expanding outward to encompass all nations through the Church. The core takeaway is that Christ's mission—though initially directed toward the "lost sheep of the house of Israel"—was never intended to be limited to the chosen people Israel. Instead, Israel was the divinely established instrument meant to facilitate the gathering of all peoples. The interaction with the Canaanite woman serves as a pedagogical moment where Jesus exposes the cultural biases of his disciples, affirms the faith of a "foreigner," and demonstrates the expansiveness of God's mercy.

The "trajectory of salvation history" is essential for overcoming modern prejudices. The homily identifies the truth that individuals often harbor active biases and "lack of understandings" like those of the early disciples, seeking to exclude certain groups from God's mercy. To truly participate in Christ's mission, one must recognize its universal scope. The Church is composed of people from "every race and nation," and the goal of salvation history is a "new unity of humanity." The ultimate objective of understanding this history is to be "freed from these biases and prejudices" in order to love as God loves.

Universal Direction of Biblical Salvation History

This week the first reading, psalm, and second reading all point us to how we ought to understand the encounter between Jesus and the Phoenician woman, which very much has to do with salvation history. And, that it is a conversation in which all (apostles present and us) learn about the expansiveness of God's plan of salvation. History is moving toward Christ and then from Christ history is moving to this expansive mercy and love of God for everyone.

We all know the story, how God created one human family, which over time, became dispersed into many nations. For our reflections on the readings for this weekend, we need to dive into the period of salvation history after Noah and the flood. Genesis 10 presents post-flood humanity as spreading from the families of Noah's three sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—into distinct peoples, lands, languages, and nations. Nations whose diversity exists within the unity of the human race under God's providence. The many peoples remain one humanity, even as they become culturally and linguistically distinct.¹

During the initial period of biblical human history, humanity increasingly moved away from the true worship of God, that is; recognition of the one Creator and Lord; adoration, which belongs to God alone; thanksgiving, repentance, obedience, and self-offering; bodily and social expression, not merely private feeling; conformity to God's revealed will rather than human invention.² Turning away from this authentic worship, we can refer to as religious apostasy. Scripture frequently describes the nations as turning from the Creator toward idols and the creature rather than the Creator.

Noah's three sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—became the fathers of families, nations whose diversity existed within the unity of humanity under God's providence. The many peoples remain one humanity, even as they become culturally and linguistically distinct. The Canaanites were one group among the many who developed.³ They are described as rising from Noah's grandson Canaan whose father was Ham, the son who committed a grave sin against Noah and was then cursed by him. The land of Canaan was an area that ancient texts indicate may have included parts of modern-day Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. These Canaanites, all descendants of Noah are all related in some way. They grew into different families who developed different traditions as they moved and grew farther and farther from their grandparents or great grandparents, etc., etc. You can see how this dynamic works from personal familial histories.

Reflecting on Church history over the last 2,000 years, over the last 500 years, we see a similar dynamic. Without strong and central guidance, we can tend to get individualistic about our understanding of God and worship. We think to ourselves, you know, I want to worship my way. I want to do it my way. I don't want to do it the way God intended. We also rally others to our way of thinking and end up with a separated groups who have a variety of different interpretations that often developed into heresies that needed to be addressed, unfortunately there's no way you can address it all. Because we can see that in our own immediate history, we can understand that dynamic in world history and the development of peoples and languages and culture and religion. Remember the visual of God's plan for our salvation, God's intention is that first beginning with a chosen group of people who ultimately are a remnant of believers? This is where Abraham comes into the story.

Noah's descendant Abram through the line of Shem, in response to the call of God, took his wife Sara, other family members, and servants and journeyed to Canaan. Later, after having formed as the Israelite people, they were forced by famine to leave Canaan for Egypt, subsequently becoming slaves. In time, hearing the cries of the people, God freed them from slavery, leading them out of Egypt toward the promised land, the land of the Canaanites. Recent DNA research confirmed that the Canaanites were the descendants of Stone Age settlers who lived in the land of Canaan.⁴ Administrative texts found at Alalakh, and at another city named Ugarit which is located in modern-day Syria, show that the designation 'the land

¹ Vatican Council II. *Lumen Gentium*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964. Chapter 2, 13

² *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913.

³ Genesis 9:24-25

⁴ Killebrew, Ann E. *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.* Archaeology and Biblical Studies 9. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.

of Canaan' was employed to specify the identity of an individual or group of individuals in the same way that others were defined by their city or land of origin.⁵

We can see how the non-Jewish peoples, Gentiles, Pagans, and Samaritans, as they came to be known, stand within the broader biblical drama: humanity is scattered, divided, and religiously estranged, but God intends to gather them all. This is the mystery already anticipated in the promise to Abraham: through one chosen family, blessing is to reach all the families of the earth. Israel's election was never meant to terminate in Israel alone.

Once there, they fought a series of wars against the Canaanites, which led to victories over most of the Canaanite people. The Canaanites who survived became slaves.⁶ The conquered land was incorporated into a powerful Israelite kingdom that eventually split in two and subsequently fell to the Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Israel had never fully controlled Canaan, especially the coastal areas. Knowing this part of God's historical timeline of salvation, helps us to better understand what it means when Jesus says, "*the house of Israel*". He means the covenant people, the twelve tribes descended from Jacob.

The last piece of this puzzle of salvation history, as it relates to the Gospel reading, is an overview of the two cities, Sidon and Tyre. They grew in power and importance up to the time of Jesus and beyond. Sidon, deriving its name from Canaan's firstborn son, stood as the progenitor city of the Phoenicians, later known by the Greeks as Sidonians. As the initial principal city, Sidon's influence extended beyond its immediate borders, seeding the establishment of Tyre, a colony that would eventually overshadow Sidon in prominence. Sidon's history during the time of Christ, as captured in the New Testament, presents a city that despite its pagan past, became a backdrop for significant episodes in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and the early Christian community.

Despite the historical backdrop of Sidonian idolatry, Jesus highlighted the potential receptivity of Sidon to His message, contrasting it with the unbelief prevalent in some Jewish communities. His assertion that Sidon would find Judgment Day more tolerable than the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida underscores the scope of His ministry and the possibility of redemption for all peoples, including those outside the traditional bounds of Israel.⁷

The narrative of Paul's journey to Rome, as a prisoner, includes a brief but significant stop in Sidon, where he was allowed to visit with fellow believers,⁸ further illustrates the early Christian community's presence in Sidon, marking the city as a part of the burgeoning network of Christian fellowship and support across the Roman Empire. The hospitality and care extended to Paul by the brothers in Sidon underscore the spread and impact of Christian witness and the bonds of brotherhood that transcended geographical and cultural divides. These interactions underscore the transformative potential of faith and the expansive reach of the Gospel, bridging cultural and religious divides to foster a community of believers united in Christ. Through these narratives, Sidon emerges not only as a historical city of note but also as a participant in the unfolding story of redemption and the spread of Christianity in the ancient world.

In today's Gospel, Jesus enters this Canaanite territory, specifically the districts of Tyre and Sidon, something he very seldom does.⁹ The mention of people from Sidon among the crowds that sought Jesus'

⁵ Benz, Brendon C. *The Land Before the Kingdom of Israel: A History of the Southern Levant and the People who Populated It*. History, Archaeology, and Culture of the Levant. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2016.

⁶ Judges 1:28

⁷ Matthew 11:20-22; Luke 10:13, 14

⁸ Acts 27:1-3

⁹ Haber M, Doumet-Serhal C, Scheib C ...Continuity and Admixture in the Last Five Millennia of Levantine History from Ancient Canaanite and Present-Day Lebanese Genome Sequences *The American Journal of Human Genetics*, 2017; 101, 274-282

healing touch further emphasizes the region's interaction with the burgeoning Christian movement. These individuals, whether Jews, proselytes, or Gentiles intrigued by Jesus' teachings, signify the appeal of His message and the early inklings of Christianity's spread beyond Jewish communities.¹⁰

The Old Testament portrays Israel's salvation as involving the restoration of the scattered people and the fulfillment of God's promises through them. Jesus had a specific mission to accomplish during his earthly lifetime. Fulfill the Old Testament prophecies and lay the foundation for the universal sacrament of salvation, the Catholic Church. The first fold of sheep is Israel, and the "other sheep" are Gentiles. Saint Thomas Aquinas connects Christ's "other sheep" with the prophecy that Jesus would die *"not only for the nation, but also for the children of God who are dispersed, that they may be gathered into one."*¹¹ The Gentiles are not gathered into a second, parallel salvation community, but brought into one-fold under one Shepherd.

Saint Thomas Aquinas explains it this way, that Christ was sent "to all," but first to the Jews, so that the Jews might become the instrument through which the Gentiles would be brought in. Christ's mission to Israel was therefore not a limitation of the divine plan but its divinely established order. Pope Saint John Paul II describes the Gospel's movement among the nations as culminating in *"a new unity of humanity,"* in fulfillment of Christ's promise to draw all people to himself.¹² At that time all peoples, all the Gentile nations are invited to hope for eternal life in the household of God, the *"house of prayer for all peoples"* as Isaiah had prophesied in the First Reading. Through Israel, God prepared the way for the Messiah; through Christ, God gathers both Israel and the nations into one new covenant people, the Church, under one Shepherd.

The Church is therefore not merely one religion among the religions derived from the nations. She is the new and universal People of God, constituted by Christ and the Holy Spirit. Her citizens come from every race and nation, and the Church receives what is good in the cultures of peoples, purifying, strengthening, elevating, and ennobling it in Christ.¹³

Now we can more effectively understand the encounter between Christ and the Syrophoenician woman. Contrary to some bad interpretations, the encounter didn't suddenly make Jesus think, "Huh, well, my mission was Israel, but you know, you got a point there. I think I'll change my mind." Rather that Christ's mission to Israel is not a limitation of the divine plan, but part of the divinely established order of the plan as things are moving forward, as St. Thomas Aquinas noted, and the Church is actually in the plan of salvation the new and universal people of God. You are the new and universal people of God, constituted by Christ, which is why we can say with the Holy Spirit, we are the mystical body of Christ, the Church. We her citizens, come from every race and nation. The Church receives the good of all our cultures, purifies, strengthens, elevates, and ennobles in Christ.

In this moment of encounter with the woman, keeping in mind the context we've considered, there are a lot of presumptions made on the part of the Apostles and disciples present. Presumption meaning, because she's a Syrophoenician woman, she's definitely not a believer in Christ or a Jew. However, as we've seen, that's not necessarily true. So, the exchange between her and Jesus should not be surprising or confusing. The language she uses indicates that she has an understanding which may be because she's come to faith or that she was a remnant Jew in the region who then comes to deeper faith recognizing Christ for who he is and seeking him out for help. The apostles and disciples who were there, they are

¹⁰ Mark 3:7, 8; Luke 6:17

¹¹ Aquinas, Thomas. "Commentary on John."

¹² Vatican Council II. *Lumen Gentium*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964. Chapter 2, 13

¹³ Aquinas, Thomas. "Commentary on Matthew."

reacting the way all of us tend to react, according to what's normal in the culture that has formed us. We can know that their initial reaction has nothing to do with her race or where she's from because we've seen them do this before. Jesus, like before is having none of it. Why?

Remember, we must look at this in the whole context of the history. Instead, he looks at her; now, what do we know about what happens when Jesus looks at us? He looks with love. He looks with mercy. So, he looks at her and he says, *"My mission is to the chosen people. My mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* He is most likely doing two things here. As he looks at her, he's assuring her of his care, his compassion. The son of God can't look you in the eye without you feeling this. Imagine now, he turned his head to look at the people that who are with him, and she turns her gaze toward them as well. He might have given her a little knowing nod as he turned. He then says exactly what they're thinking. As he speaks, it is the partial truth that comes first which is what they understand. We imagine them smiling in agreement. Jesus plans to take them into the deeper truth, that the mission isn't limited to them. It's universal salvation through them.

So, we might say that he's intentionally putting the apostles and the disciples at ease, preparing them to receive and understand the deeper truth. They're a little agitated, a little frustrated. The woman is obviously not unaware of this, which is an even stronger argument that she's familiar with what it means to be a Jew in that time. So, she says in response, *"Lord, help me."* Apparently, she says it in such a way that Jesus understands what she means, that she understands what she's saying when she says, "Lord." In response, he takes it to the next thing that occupies the minds of his followers who are paying eagle-eyed attention to him. *"It's not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs"*, he says. Remember, the apostles and the disciples think this way. But Jesus says it out loud. He says the thing out loud that none of them wants to but is driving their behavior. You all know how that goes.

Fully engaged, she says, *"Please, Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters."* Here she displays even greater knowledge because she's covertly indicating one of the laws of the Jews, which had to do with, farming practices. A farmer might have extra kernels of wheat, ears of corn, or fruit that fall into the field. Jews were prohibited by law from cleaning up the field to get every last scrap. Those are to be left for the foreigner to glean. The very same foreigner who is often in their minds 'a dirty dog. She knows this. He knows this. They know it. There's a lot of read between the lines going on here. Jesus is teaching everybody about the nature of salvation and his mission and that even in the law this is recognized.

He continues, *"Woman, great is your faith."* You get it." Possibly recalling to our and the minds of those present another time when he said that it would better on judgement for the people of Tyre and Sidon because they accepted what the Jews rejected, the Messiah. Just as this woman demonstrated in the face of the intransigence and the lack of love and compassion of those who were living with Christ during those years that he was teaching. Boom. So much going on there.

I'm always surprised when people get hung up on this story, saying how Jesus was so mean, therefore they will not believe. In fact, as we have seen, he's treating this woman with the utmost respect while gently, mercifully, charitably teaching those who need to grow up a bit in faith. This would have been very humbling for them, to hear him say to this woman, *"Great is your faith."*

All to say that we need to understand the trajectory of salvation history because there are many today that we might want to exclude. There are some in our history that we might want to think, oh that guy, totally beyond salvation. That one, definitely not going to see him in heaven, etc., etc. We all have active similar biases, lack of understandings, and prejudices from which we act and react. But the Lord is saying, if we're

to understand his mission, and we need to because we're part of the mission, if we're to understand the mission, we need to understand the fullness of the mission and be freed from these biases and prejudices, etc.

Freed to love as God loved us.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Canaanites	Descendants of Noah's grandson Canaan; ancient inhabitants of a region covering parts of modern Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.
Gleaning	The practice, rooted in Jewish law, of leaving scraps of a harvest in the field for foreigners and the poor to collect.
Gentiles	A term used to describe non-Jewish peoples, nations, or those outside the original covenant of Israel.
House of Israel	The covenant people of God, specifically the twelve tribes descended from the patriarch Jacob.
Mystical Body of Christ	A theological description of the Church, comprising citizens from every race and nation united under Christ through the Holy Spirit.
Proselyte	A person who has converted from one opinion, religion, or party to another; in this context, a convert to Judaism or the early Christian movement.
Religious Apostasy	The act of turning away from the true worship of the Creator toward idols, human invention, and the elevation of the creature over the Creator.
Remnant	A small remaining group of believers, such as the line of Abraham, through whom God maintained His covenant and plan for salvation.
Salvation History	The unfolding of God's plan to redeem humanity, moving from the creation of one human family through specific covenants to a universal call in Christ.
Syrophoenician	A term referring to the Canaanite woman's specific regional identity, combining Syrian and Phoenician geographical contexts.