

## Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Lectionary: 118

### Reading 1 - [IS 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 - [PS 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8](#) - R. (4) O God, let all the nations praise you!**

### Reading 2 - [ROM 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 - [MT 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 Gospel reading this weekend is extraordinary in its layered complexity, but when considered with the first and the second readings, God reveals to us a simple teaching on the breadth and depth of God's loving mercy for all people, His plan for the salvation of the world from the beginning.

The first reading from the *Isaiah 56:1, 6-7* is a prophesy of the fulfillment of the covenantal promise of God to Abraham, *"I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and I will give them all these lands, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth will find blessing—this because Abraham obeyed me, keeping my mandate, my commandments, my ordinances, and my instructions."* [Gen 24:4-5](#) The temple of that future messianic age will be a "house of prayer" for all peoples. What is that temple, that house of prayer about which Isaiah prophesies? It is the Church of Christ.

It is the Church of Christ formed by the blood and water which flowed from the side of Christ. Saint Augustine, Tractatus 120, Paragraph 1 teaching on [John 19:31-20:9](#) helps us to understand how this prophesy of Isaiah began to be realized in the Messianic age. He noted that *"A suggestive word was made use of by the evangelist, in not saying pierced, or wounded His side, or anything else, but opened; that thereby, in a sense, the gate of life might be thrown open, from whence have flowed forth the sacraments of the Church, without which there is no entrance to the life which is the true life. That blood was shed for the remission of sins; that water it is that makes up the health-giving cup, and supplies at once the laver of baptism and water for drinking. This was announced beforehand, when Noah was commanded to make a door in the side of the ark, [Genesis 6:16](#) whereby the animals might enter which were not destined to perish in the flood, and by which the Church was prefigured. Because of this, the first woman was formed from the side of the man when asleep [Genesis 2:22](#) and was called Life, and the mother of all living. [Genesis 3:20](#) Truly it pointed to a great good, prior to the great evil of the transgression (in the guise of one thus lying asleep). This second Adam bowed His head and fell asleep on the cross, that a spouse might be formed for Him from that which flowed from the sleeper's side. O death, whereby the dead are raised anew to life! What can be purer than such blood? What more health-giving than such a wound?"*

In the second reading from the letter to the Romans, [Romans 11:13-15, 29-32](#) Saint Paul affirms the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy and makes its significance all the more clear. That in Christ the Messiah, who is the expected son of David, the King of Kings whose reign will have no end, the Church becomes the fulfillment of all the hopes and promises made to Israel, and that it is not limited to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin but is extended to Gentiles and all the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Jesus has come to save the Jews, the remnant of Israel and it is to them that he first goes. It is to them that He first sends His apostles, and it is to them to whom St. Paul first goes as he follows the promptings of the Holy Spirit for his missionary journeys. He comes to the faithful and the lost as the fulfillment of the promise. He comes as the shepherd in search of the lost sheep of the house of Israel, to gather them together as promised. He comes for the people of all nations, the ones of whom Isaiah speaks. Although Jesus knows the plan of salvation as it was from the beginning, he must slowly reveal this to His apostles. He helps them to become free of their blindness so as to see as God sees, to love as God loves and become able to fulfill their part in His continuing mission for the salvation of the world.

It is in this context, historical and cultural, that we must read the account of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman.

So let's explore in more detail this history of man and God. Remember Noah, who was blameless in a generation whose wickedness and corruption were so great that God was sorry he had created man. One of his sons was named Ham. [Genesis 6:9](#) He was the one who discovered Noah's drunken nakedness and then gossiped about it to his brothers. [Genesis 9](#) We don't have all the details of the situation in Scripture, but apparently Ham handled the situation in a most grievously sinful way, causing Noah to curse Ham's son, Canaan. That might seem odd, since

Ham was the guilty person, but you'll remember that God also chose to curse / punish a son for the sins of the Father. This is what happened to Solomon and his son Rehoboam. [1 Kings 11:11-13](#)

When Noah cursed Canaan, he used the expression "Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren." [Genesis 9:25](#) The expression "servant of servants", otherwise translated "slave of slaves", emphasizes the extreme degree of servitude that Canaan will experience in relation to his "brothers". In terms of the much later relationship between the Jews and the Canaanites, this is a really important piece to understanding not only the relationship between the Jews and the Canaanites / Syro-Phoenicians, but also the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus in order to have her daughter healed. In the Kingdom of Israel, having invaded and possessed the land of the Canaanites, they were made to serve the Israelites and they weren't treated very well. As well, it might be noted that when the Lord said to Solomon that the Kingdom (of the south, Judah) would be torn away and given to their servants, these Canaanites who were overcome by the Assyrian Empire and then again by the Babylonian Empire, become part of the overtaking and punishment of Judah.

In between the time of Noah and his family, after the flood and before the Exodus, the Canaanites were those descended from Canaan and lived in therefore in the land of Canaan, son of Ham, son of Noah. They were the tribes who originally occupied all the territory from Sidon or Hamath in the north to Gaza in the southwest and Lasha in the southeast. This territory, known as the Levant, is roughly the areas of modern-day Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, western Jordan, and western Syria. Canaan's firstborn son was Sidon. [Genesis 10:19](#) At the height of the power of the Egyptians, Egypt held considerable power over the Canaanite kings.

This same land of Canaan was a significant portion of the land that God promised to the Israelites. The Hebrews, now formed into the Israelite nation of God conquered much of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, building a powerful Israelite Kingdom that encompassed Tyre and Sidon to the Northwest, Jaffa to the Southwest, over and down to the wilderness of Kadesh, up along the Jordan and in the center to the lands east of the river Jordan. This United Kingdom, under the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon, lasted for just over 100 years (1045 – 930 BC). It eventually split in two much smaller kingdoms. [1 Kings 11:11-13](#) [1 Kings 11:29-31](#) [1 Kings 11:37-38](#)

The Northern Kingdom lost most of the lands west of the Jordan as well as much is the northeastern territory, including Tyre and Sidon. That area in particular was lost to the growing Assyrian Empire. It was ultimately destroyed by the Assyrians, as a consequence / punishment for having forsaken God and become like the pagans who were now their conquerors. [1 Kings 12:28-33](#) Over time, the people worshipping other gods grew in number, Israel divided, and the Kingdoms fell to the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. Those returning from exile and those who had survived in Jerusalem, became the remnant of Judah, and known as the Jews. They were now surrounded by other peoples and gods, among whom were scattered the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the 10 tribes.

What of Tyre and Sidon in Canaan? Historical and archaeological evidence indicate both cities were settled by the early second millennium BC and were important seaports long before the Israelites settled in Canaan. While Tyre and Sidon were considered Canaanite during the second millennium BC, scholars call the Lebanese coast after the time of the Israelite Conquest of Canaan, Phoenicia. 'Phoenicia' was the name given to the region by the Greeks, from their word for purple. The ancient world's purple dye industry developed from extracting a fluid from a Mediterranean mollusk, the murex. Not only did the people of the Phoenician coast develop this industry, they specialized in shipping this very valuable commodity all over the Mediterranean world.

By the time of the first century AD, the Phoenicians and especially the Tyrians, had become the bitterest enemies of the Jews." Tyre and Sidon had become prosperous port cities of the Roman province of Syria and Phoenicia. The Roman settlement of Tyre, to the south of the original island community of Tyre, was constructed adjacent

to the causeway linking it to the mainland, built by Alexander the Great during his siege in 332BC. Tyre became part of the Roman Empire in 64BC and was one of the first Roman cities in the region to embrace Christianity. It was just 20 miles south of Sidon, itself just 20 miles south of modern day Beirut in Lebanon. Sidon, was named after the firstborn son of Canaan [Genesis 10:15](#). Jacob spoke of it as the boundary of Zebulun [Genesis 49:13](#) and Joshua included it as part of the land promised to Israel [Joshua 13:6](#). Sidon was included in the inheritance of Asher, on its northern boundary [Joshua 19:28](#), but it was not taken by that tribe in conquest [Judges 1:31](#), [3:3](#).

This was the same area where God sent Elijah when the widow fed him [1 Kgs 17:9](#). Elijah's visit was to the port city of Zaphath which was about mid-way between Sidon and Tyre. Both these Old and New Testament visits to the region may be a reminder that the Promised Land extended as far north as Sidon. While there were many people of varying origins, increasingly over the centuries, it remained none the less part of Israel's inheritance and a region of great importance for the unfolding of the plan of salvation.

This history of the region helps us to understand what the disciples would have expected as they were led by Jesus into the region of Tyre and Sidon. Although we cannot know what they were thinking, it is hard to imagine that they were not actively confused and worried. Jesus was leading them into what they considered to be enemy territory, filled with awful people, unclean and immoral. They were in no way prepared for what Jesus had in store for them, but without the lesson they were about to learn they would not become free to go out into all the world and preach the saving Gospel Truth to everyone with equal love and mercy. It also helps us to better understand the use of the phrase, 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' in the New Testament period, and so too the encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus.

The phrase "lost sheep of Israel" [1st Kings 22:17](#) [Jeremiah 50:17](#) isn't a casual expression. We are in fact well advised to pay close attention to phrases like this, which are repeated over and over in Scripture. The lost sheep of Israel are like scattered sheep without shepherds, because of the sinfulness of their leaders, those entrusted with their care, by God. [Jeremiah 23:2](#) [Jeremiah 50:17](#) [Ezekiel 34:10](#) This is especially relevant as we reflect on the Gospel story of the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. We are now made mindful of the promise of God to regather the lost sheep, the remnant of Israel. [Micah 2:12](#) God will not initiate the regathering through others but will effect this on His own. [Ezekiel 34:11](#) God Himself will examine them and deliver them to be led out from among the nations and bring them back. [Ezekiel 34:11-16](#) [Jeremiah 23:3-4](#) In those days, (the Messianic Age) God will raise up shepherds and a new King from the line of David. [Jeremiah 23:4-6](#) Then, Christ after having begun the gathering to Himself and given Himself in sacrifice, will commission the Apostles to continue the mission and fulfill the promise of salvation for all peoples. [Matthew 28:19](#)

We are also reminded of the meaning of the lost sheep by Hosea who prophesied that the House of Israel would be scattered, that God would no longer have mercy on them—but He would have mercy on the House of Judah—and the House of Israel would cease to exist. They would no longer be called His people. [Hosea 1:1-9](#) But he also spoke a promise of God, that they would indeed be as the sand of the sea and they would be called the sons of the living God. [Hosea 2:1-2](#) This promise was echoed in the words of the prophet Ezekiel as he prophesied about the dry bones of the house of Israel, [Ezekiel 37:9-14](#) and the reunification of the Kingdom [Ezekiel 37:16-19](#) under the new King of the line of David. [Ezekiel 37:21-28](#) On the occasion of this regathering of the sheep under the Son of God, there will be a New Covenant, a new testament. [Jeremiah 31:31-38](#) In this new covenantal period the people of Kingdom are gathered in Christ through baptism, becoming the living stones of the Church, the members of the mystical Body of Christ the Church who share in the Divine life the Holy Trinity. This Church, born of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost whose substance is the water and blood from the side of Christ, and as such becomes the primordial sacrament of salvation for the whole world.

So, now let's come back to the Gospel and this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. As our own experience with email and texting shows, it is easy to misread the writer's intentions. Jesus could have been speaking with arrogance, contempt and racial superiority. But that would be completely contrary to everything we know about Jesus. It could also have been said in a testing and joking way. "You know very well, that in my community it is not right to take the children's food and give it to the 'dogs'!" And she, totally unfazed and taking her cue from his tone of voice, throws back: "Oh yes, Lord, but even the dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." The term "dogs" was commonly used by Jews to describe the Gentiles and we have come to have insight into why this happened. As well, in practical terms, dogs were regarded by the Jews as unclean, because they would eat anything given to them, including pork, for instance. The Gentiles, in the eyes of the Jews, who were very particular about what was clean and unclean, were no better than dogs.

The reference of 'Dog' or more accurately translated 'little doggies', is in fact more of an analogy related to action and not so much an analogy related to person. We can be surer of this because of the language and tone being used by both Jesus and the woman. We can be quite sure that the compassion in his look, demeanor and tone would have ensured that His words were not received as insult and bitterness borne of long-standing animosity between their people. The rich and complex historical context which we have considered up to now, helps us to see that Jesus is engaging with the woman, not just as an individual in the way we conceive of an encounter like this, but as a person whose identity is intimately bound within the identity of a people. Let's also add to our reflection some other important words and events from the New Testament.

Saint John Chrysostom explained that the Canaanite woman signifies repentant souls. Particularly those who have been scattered among the nations and all people of all nations. She cried for mercy because as a woman in the land of Canaan, she was not part of the covenant community, yet she knew that Jesus was the God and King of the nation of Israel. She calls Him Lord (*Kurios*) and Son of David.

Although it's easy to think of this woman merely as a Jewish stereotype of a Canaanite woman, it is more reasonable in the context of the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel', to view her as someone who has already been witnessed to and who has repented and returned. At the height of Jesus' ministry and some might say, popularity, crowds are following Him, listening to His messages, seeing people being healed and demons being cast out of people. The gospel writers state that the people were from Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, Perea and Tyre and Sidon [Mark 3:6-12; Luke 6:17-19](#). This makes very reasonable the possibility that she had already heard Jesus and possibly seen Him heal the sick and cast out demons in Galilee before He came to Tyre. Barring that direct encounter, it may be that she had heard about Jesus' mighty works from family or friends that had gone to Galilee. Most likely the former is the case because the woman expressed her faith in the Lord Jesus and had a correct theological understanding as to who He was [Rom. 10:9-17](#).

As we are coming to understand, Jesus was neither joking with her nor insulting her. Rather, he was engaging with her about the beauty of God's plan for salvation. Let's also keep in mind at this point, that just prior to this encounter Jesus had fed the 5000. Remember, there were 12 wicker baskets of scraps leftover. [Mt 14:13-21](#) Also keep in mind that Jewish law held that the corners of the fields and the 'gleanings' were to be shared with the poor and the outsiders, the foreigner. [Leviticus 19:9-11](#) As well, the number 12 in scripture always directly or indirectly refers to the 12 tribes of Israel. Now remember, the 10 tribes of 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' who will be blessed by the blessing of Judah. Those few words about dogs eating the scraps makes so much more sense when we read them in light of such things as this and in connection to history.

However, the disciples caught up as they were in their nationalistic pride which led to a prejudice against the Canaanites and this woman, misinterpreted Jesus' silence as a righteous rejection of the woman. Seemingly vindicated in their view, they discriminated against her, saying to Jesus, "Send her away." But Jesus, speaking to no one in particular but to all present, begins to unveil the great expanse of His mission. He answered "I was

*not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” The ‘Lost sheep of Israel’, as we have seen, refers to the lost among the Jews, but also indicates the lost sheep *who are Israel*”, and foreshadows salvation through adoption, being grafted onto the vine. [Romans 11](#) [Ephesians 3](#) Jesus reinforces for them what He has been slowly revealing to them, that all people are to be included in God’s salvation, through the Jews. Jesus knows that if His disciples can begin to grasp this lesson, they will become empowered in their true freedom, to handle the fullness of the demands of their mission.

We too must learn this same lesson, as we too have become partakers in the very same mission. We are blessed so as to bless. We are called to freely share what we have freely been given. If we are to do this, we must of course be free. We must be free of prejudice against others, no matter who they are, what color they are, where they’re from, what they’ve done... we must be ready to give witness to God’s love and mercy, Gods saving grace without exclusion. We must also free God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit from the boxes we tend to put them in, from our preconceptions. We must be truly free of any actions, thoughts and words that are not reflective of the fullness of the truth of God.

As Isaiah said, we were once foreigners, but now must observe what is right, do what is just (Listen to Him and do what He says). Having joined the Lord, we minister to him in and through our Love of God and Love of Neighbor. We must be servants who demonstrate our love for the name of the Lord, just as Jesus taught us to pray ‘Our Father, hallowed be your name’ and hold to the covenant. For His part, God gathers us together, leading us to His holy mountain where we are made joyful in His house of prayer, the Church. There God provides for us the offerings which we offer, the sacrifices which we sacrifice, and finds them acceptable. There, we are made one by the Holy Spirit, as partakers in the Eucharist.

God prevails. The plan of salvation unfolds in our midst as we have become its instruments. The reign of God has come and His Kingdom Comes. Israel reborn.