

20th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; Cycle – A; Aug. 20th 2023
Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

It is true that God has chosen Israel to be his special people. He says to Moses in **Exodus 6:7**, **“I will take you as my own people, and you shall have me as your God.”** God always stood with His people and even drove out all the Gentiles from the Promised Land and gave it to Israel. This truth made the impression among the people of Israel that God loved only Israel and eternal salvation was their exclusive right. But God never said anywhere that salvation is denied to the Gentiles. Today’s first reading from the Book of Isaiah is the clear indication that God accepted non-Jews too provided they kept the precepts of the Lord. They were welcomed to the Holy Mountain of God to offer sacrifice acceptable to God. Still the Jews were not ready to change their concept as they considered the Gentiles to be the condemned people. It is true that Jesus too concentrated his ministry mostly among the Jews. But he has not totally abandoned the Gentiles. He even went to their towns and villages and preached and worked miracles.

Today’s gospel illustrates the encounter of Jesus with a Canaanite woman who was a Gentile. The initial conversation of Jesus to this woman re-affirms the belief of the Jews that God hated the Gentiles. The Canaanite woman’s case always put many good Christians in confusion and doubt. They wonder how could Jesus, who was very kind to the sick and suffering, become so unkind towards a desperate woman. Apparently Jesus seems to be rude to that poor woman in his answer, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”* On the other hand Jesus never denied a healing to anyone, no matter who he/she was. If we take any healing miracles of Jesus, we know that Jesus is not a kind of person who denies a favor. He walked miles to raise the daughter of Jairus; he set out to the house of a centurion who was Gentile, to cure his servant.

So in order to understand the comment of Jesus in this context we need to understand a little bit about the existing hostile attitude of the Jews to the Gentiles. The Jews hated the Gentiles and called them *‘stray dogs.’* They believed that Gentiles were created by God, so that he could have enough fuel for the fire in hell. According to the Scripture scholars Jesus was just repeating the words of the Jews to test her faith and perseverance. Perhaps anyone would have left the area with this insult. But the tit for tat answer of that woman, *“Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters,”* amazed Jesus and it made Jesus say, ***“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”*** The woman was very persisting and prevailed over Jesus. Literally she conquered the heart of Jesus.

In this incident, Matthew wants to draw our attention to the deep faith and perseverance of the Canaanite woman. **The perseverance of this woman in prayer is a great model for those of us who lose faith in prayer because God has not answered our prayers the way we wanted.** Discarding the initial refusal of Jesus, the woman went on with her plea and she won. Through the ‘parable of the unjust judge and the widow’ (Luke 18:1-8), Jesus asks us not to give up hope but to persist in our prayers. He concludes this parable with the saying: **“Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them?”** The Psalmist expresses his trust in the Lord in these words, **“You open wide your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:16).**

These days, people are getting more impatient with one another for simple reasons. Many keep the same attitude towards God too. If God doesn’t answer their prayers instantly, many even quit the faith and prayer. But we should not be discouraged by the initial refusal of God to answer our prayers. Let us keep in mind one thing that God never turns His back against our genuine prayers. But at the same time He will not answer them the way we expect but as God thinks what is good for us. St. Monica prayed for the conversion of her son Augustine for 17 long years and finally she got what she prayed for. Not only Augustine was converted but also he became a priest, bishop and finally a great saint. This is the way God gives gifts to his faithful children who persevere in prayer. Sometimes, God tests our faith and perseverance too. Please remember, God didn’t answer the intense prayer of Jesus at Gethsemane the way Jesus thought to be good for him. Even Jesus felt that he was abandoned by his Father and that is why he cried on the cross, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Perhaps, we too have such experience. But God will never forsake us at any moment. Let us not give up our hope in prayer. Sometimes people complain that they cannot concentrate on prayer as they are too sick or sad. Other times we are distracted while we sit to pray. At such situations the best prayer we can offer to God is our sickness or sadness even our distractions. When we offer it to the Lord with a positive attitude, they become pleasing prayer to God. At the same time we should not dictate God how He should act; rather let us wait patiently for God to act in His own way and His Will should be done. But our perseverance in prayer will bring us the fruit.