

20th Sunday A (Matt 15:21-28)

Sometimes I reflect on my sixty-eight years as a Jesuit, and in all that time, I've lived in many distant places that are foreign to me. I've lived among people whose cultures and traditions are different from my own. Living in strange lands and among unfamiliar people has triggered a curious interest to learn as much as I can about those places and those people, so that I can grow in appreciation of their customs and values. Some years ago, I had the opportunity of being a student in Clinical Pastoral Education at the University of Santo Tomas Hospital in Manila. After undergoing some culture shock, I came to a deeper appreciation of some of the Filipino cultural values of family life, hospitality, care for their aged, and their deep Catholic faith.

Sometimes through ignorance and fear, we may tend to mistrust those who are different from us, to keep ourselves separate from them, and to build walls of division and isolation. In doing so, we cut ourselves off from sharing and learning from the richness of those who differ from us.

Down through the centuries it seems that one group of people has found it necessary to look down on other groups of people as inferior, culturally deprived, less civilized, or less graced by God in some way. In our first reading from Isaiah, written centuries before Christ, the call is to foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, ministering to him, and becoming his servants, becoming joyful in the Lord's house of prayer for all peoples. That's a radical statement from a prophet of God's covenant people, Israel, who tended to look down on their unenlightened neighbors.

St. Paul in our second reading calls himself the apostle of the gentiles, as he reaches out with God's loving mercy to those who are foreign to him. Paul considers no culture or people as alien to the spread of the Gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and he gives his entire life to that mission.

Our Gospel speaks to us of Jesus, who never left the boundaries of Palestine, who carries on a typical Middle Eastern witty, bantering dialog with a Canaanite woman who came asking that her daughter be healed. Jews held Canaanites as inferior and despised, and an ordinary Jew wouldn't speak with one. Jesus, however, transcending his possible prejudice, perceived her great faith and affirmed and supported and cured her daughter.

What Jesus is telling us is that the bottom line in how we live our lives as Christians is faith, a faith that transcends cultures and peoples and tribes and nations, a faith that results in a justice that crushes prejudice and looking down on others. As we glance around the world today, to Israel and the Palestinians, to the countries of Africa, to our own state of California with the increasing Latino and Asian population growth, and to other places too numerous to list, the importance of the message is imperative for our survival and the survival of the world. St. Paul speaks to us of the reconciliation of the world, reconciliation with the God who loves us in Christ Jesus, and reconciliation with each other. To this we are called as we are empowered by the Eucharist of Jesus.

Al Grosskopf, S.J.