

Homily for 20th Sunday Ordinary Time

August 16th 2020

“The Kingdom and the King”

In today’s readings we have a theme that is central to our faith – we are part of a kingdom, whose king calls each one of us to share in his kingly rule. However this is a kingdom not obvious to many, because as the king of this realm stated to one in the service of the kingdom of Rome, “my kingdom is not of this world”.

In this homily I want to talk with you about the three dimensions of Jesus’ kingdom:

1. It is centred in Jesus
2. Because of this we are to be in relationship with Jesus
3. His kingdom is visible in this world even though we won’t experience its fullness until we are in heaven.

In our reading from the Gospel we discover that a woman who was a Canaanite realized the kingdom is centred in Jesus. Now her nationality is significant. The Canaanites were the people who lived in the holy land before the Israelites came in and conquered them. They dwelt in the land of Canaan, as it was then known, at the time of Joshua and Judges, 1300 years before Jesus. So this woman isn’t just a Gentile. She isn’t even just a pagan. She belongs to the Canaanites, which of all the pagan peoples, were the most immersed not just in idolatry, but in immorality, and had a history for being the enemies of Israel. They were at war constantly with Israel in the Old Testament.

The disciples realize who this woman is and the people from whence she comes and so they direct Jesus:

“Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”

But Jesus doesn’t heed their counsel. At the same time he apparently ignores her request when she calls after him:

Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

Matthew then goes on to comment:

²³ But he did not answer her at all

Why does Jesus seem indifferent to this woman’s appeal? I appreciate this insight from one of the early Christian commentators, St John Chrysostom, who lived in the 4th and early 5th centuries. He said that she was an example to us of patience and persistence in prayer. He wrote:

Have you understood? When the disciples entreated him the Lord put them off...

Meaning, when they asked him to send her away he refused.

but when the woman herself cried out begging for this favor he granted it. And, at the beginning, when she first made her request, he did not answer, but after she had come to him once, twice, and a third time, he gave her what she desired. By this he was teaching us that he had withheld the gift not to drive her away, but to make that woman's patience an example for all of us.¹

So what St. John Chrysostom is telling us here is that there is a spiritual meaning to Jesus' encounter with the woman. He isn't doing this to her in order to hurt her feelings or to insult her, he is testing her faith just like he tests our faith, so that we will desire him more. And notice what she expresses. By calling him the Son of David she realizes that Jesus is the person in whom the kingdom is centred. Remember King David represented the great era in the history of the Israelite people and the Son of David was a designation for the true king. Notice as well that in her next appeal to Jesus, St Matthew tells us:

²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

Now Jesus is not just the Son of David, but the "Lord", the Greek form of the name Yahweh, the designation the Jewish people gave to honour the great Name of God. Notice as well she knelt before Jesus. The Greek expression is *proskyneō*. We've seen this elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew when the Apostles *proskyneō* after Jesus comes into the boat on the stormy Sea of Galilee. But notice the English translation here is different. When the Apostles *proskyneō*, the English translation is "they worshiped him." When the Gentile woman *proskyneōs*, the English translation says that "she knelt before him." You could say here, that "she worshiped him" and said "Lord, help me." Here we see she understood that the Kingdom is centred in Jesus and he is worthy of her worship.

Secondly we see that she understood that she was to be in relationship with Jesus. This comes through clearly in the last part of their interaction:

It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Now when we read this we might think, Jesus, how can you be so rude. But what we can miss is there is a kind of playful banter that is now at play between the woman and the Lord. The food Jesus is referring to here could be the Eucharist specifically, or in a more general sense the grace that the kingdom of heaven ushers into the world. Jesus is saying that he intends for this grace to be extended first to the people from whom he came of the flesh, the Jewish nation. But the woman insists there is enough grace to go around. I will be happy even with the crumbs! She is saying "Jesus it is so important for me to be in relationship with you because you are Son of David and Lord".

Thirdly we see that this kingdom will find a visible manifestation in the healing that will occur when Jesus declares:

¹ John Chrysostom, Homily on Phillipians 1:18, 12-13; trans. in E. Barnecutt, pp. 116-117

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.²

Here the woman will experience the presence of the Kingdom in a tangible way where God’s will is manifested on earth as in heaven. What we discover in this interaction is the deepening of the Canaanite’s woman’s faith from recognizing the king, to asking to be in relationship with him so that she can encounter this everlasting kingdom in the healing of her daughter.

Six hundred years before the encounter between this woman and Jesus Isaiah had a vision of how the Kingdom of God would find expression among people like the Canaanites when he wrote:

***And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.***

Now here is the remarkable thing about this passage. In Deuteronomy 23 it declares that no foreigner is to be admitted into the assembly of the Lord. But here in Isaiah the prophet looks forward to the day when foreigners will not only be joined to the Lord but they will minister to him as priests because they will be accepted at his altar and God’s house will be for all peoples.

What does this tell us? That in Jesus this prophecy has been fulfilled and that you and I are invited to discover, as did the Canaanite woman, that Jesus is to be our king too. Each time we gather we share in the life of his visible kingdom made present to us in the Eucharist where we get to eat the bread directly from the table, for indeed there is food for all – none need to eat the crumbs – made available to you by priests from every nation to serve at the altar of the Son of David and Lord Jesus thus making the Church a house of prayer for all peoples.

² [*Catholic Daily Readings*](#). (2009). Bellingham, WA: Faithlife.