

HOMILY SUNDAY 20 - A (Homily 02)

“Great Faith, Joyful Salvation”

(Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67; Romans 11:13-15; 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28)

“For soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.”

The readings today invite us to pray for a great faith that will lead us to experience more deeply the salvation and deliverance that Jesus brings to those who believe.

There is a great promise, or perhaps even a prophecy, in the first reading from Isaiah today. The prophet proclaims that for those who maintain justice; who do what is right, who keep the Sabbath and hold fast to a covenant relationship with God, salvation and deliverance will come. They will be brought to God’s holy mountain and experience peace and joy.

The word salvation is too often bandied about and taken for granted. Some sects insist on basing their whole religious life on the question, “Are you saved?” Scripturally, salvation is to be living in the reign of God, to experience the peace and joy that only the Holy Spirit can give, and to be in an intimate, right relationship with God, other people, ourselves and all of God’s creation. That truly is salvation and that is what comes to those who believe in God and follow God’s ways.

Deliverance is basically freedom, physical and political freedom perhaps, but more importantly inner freedom from sin, and from sinfulness, that which makes us sin. It is freedom from that invisible spiritual burden that so many of us are carrying through life - our own character defects, negative attitudes and painful emotions such as anger and resentment, guilt and fear, sadness and self-pity. Those who believe in God and follow God’s ways are truly set free from this spiritual burden. They experience deliverance.

That promise of Isaiah is lived out in the Gospel, by a most unlikely character, a woman, and a non-Israelite. Jesus has deliberately crossed borders. He has gone into Gentile territory, the district of Tyre and Sidon. This is so typical of Jesus, who so often reversed rigid conventional customs and social practices of his day. Just as whenever Jesus entered into a synagogue or the Temple on the Sabbath a miracle would happen (which was considered work and thus sinful), so too whenever Jesus ventured into Gentile territory, a miracle would happen.

Part of the inner freedom of Jesus was to make salvation available to all, especially to those caught in the humanly created restrictive social norms and mores of a society that thought it had to earn God's love by means of following religious and legal prescriptions.

The Canaanite woman can be seen as a biblical figure who lived out the teachings of Isaiah. She was a foreigner *who joined herself to the Lord, who loved the name of the Lord*, who called him first *Son of David*, a title that properly belonged to the Jews. When that did not elicit the response she wanted, she called him *Lord*, a more universal title, and Jesus responded in a manner that tested her faith in him. She was not found wanting. To the contrary, her quick witted response and profound trust in him led him to marvel at the depth of her faith, and her daughter was healed. Salvation and deliverance came to her and her family, because of her faith in Jesus.

It is not a question of who is a sinner or not, of who is an Israelite or not, of denomination or creed. It is all about faith in Jesus, and the awareness that we are all sinners in need of salvation and deliverance. St. Paul makes that clear in the second reading. Out of his own deep love for and believe in Jesus and the salvation and deliverance that Jesus brings to those who believe, St. Pauls writes how he wants to make his fellow Israelites even jealous so that the gentiles would believe and then perhaps his own people would follow suit. Paul is clear – all were disobedient to God, Jew and Gentile, but now all have received mercy through Jesus Christ.

Ron Rolheiser OMI expounded on this teaching of St. Paul in a talk to the Los Angeles Religious Educators Conference in March 2011. He used the parable of the lost sheep to explain that God does not love one person more than another. The one sheep that strayed was lost, he stated, but the other ninety-nine were also in the wilderness. They were not in a good place either. Rolheiser concluded that there are no righteous people. There are only sinners who know they are sinners, like the Canaanite woman, and self-righteous sinners who do not know that they are sinners. These last are in fact the worse off because their spiritual blindness and false-pride will keep them from reaching out for help like the Canaanite woman.

In the end, we are all in need of salvation and deliverance, but that will come only to those who humbly admit their need and turn to Jesus with the faith of the Canaanite woman.

The passage from Isaiah ends with the assurance that they who believe and who practice justice will enter into right worship. Their prayers and sacrifices will be acceptable, and they will make up a house of prayer pleasing to the Lord,

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is truly right worship. We humbly listen to the Word of God, the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, and then we offer to God the sacrifice of his own Son, Jesus, who gave us the gift of his own Body and Blood.

May this celebration of right worship strengthen our faith in Jesus and help us experience that salvation and deliverance that Isaiah speaks about and that the Canaanite woman lived out.