

## TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (Year A)

August 14, 2011

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

### Introduction

The devil challenged St. Peter to a baseball game. St. Peter said: “Sure, we’ll play you, but you don’t have a chance of winning because all the really good baseball players are up here.” The devil said: “Oh, I’ll win alright. All the umpires are down here.”

We enjoy stories that contrast the good guys and the bad guys, because so much of our life involves separating people into groups like that. Today’s Gospel reading is a prime example of that. The woman who came to Jesus seeking a cure for her daughter belonged to the bad guys. She was a Canaanite, arch-enemies of the Jews. The Jews referred to such people as “dogs”. Notice that the disciples actually urge Jesus to send this woman away.

Jesus’ response to the woman at first sounds harsh to our ears. But we need to realize two things. First, he is making the point that, though God cares about all people, as the first reading and the psalm also indicate, yet there is an order to God’s Plan. Jesus is sent first to the Jews, God’s covenant people who were meant to be a light to the other nations. Second, Jesus is also testing the woman’s faith and humility. The important thing to notice, however, is that Jesus does grant the woman’s request, and he praises her faith. That shows us that God wills the good of all people. I want to consider two consequences that has for our life today: first, we need to work for the common good; and second, we need to fight bigotry and prejudice.

### We Need to Work for the Common Good

How do you get people to live together in peace in a society? There are two approaches we often see in our modern world. One way is to insist that everyone be the same. That’s the totalitarian approach. We saw it in the Soviet Union, where pressure was put on everyone to be a communist and an atheist. We saw it in the ethnic wars in Rwanda and in the Balkans, where everyone had to belong to the same racial group to be a citizen. We saw it in places like Sudan where political and social pressure was put on everyone to become a Moslem. Catholic social teaching firmly opposes this totalitarian approach because it offends against human dignity.

A different approach to living together in society is to say, let’s just be individuals, and pursue our own private interests. We’ll agree on a few ground rules to protect us from one another, but otherwise we will simply each go our own way. That’s the libertarian approach. We see versions of it in many western countries today including our own. We are all tempted to adopt this attitude. We find ourselves saying: “You do your thing and I’ll do mine and we won’t bother one another.” It’s the attitude that says our laws on contentious issues must be pro-choice. It’s the attitude that says: “The business of government is business. Its job is just to make it possible for each of us to make money.”

The social teaching of our Church also calls on us to fight against this libertarian attitude. It speaks to us instead about the principle of *solidarity*. That principle reminds us that we are not just individuals. We are social beings through and through. Each of us is part of a family, part of a community, part of a country, part of one world. These various

groups actually make us what we are. So we have to *care* about these groups and we have to work together for the *common good* of our family, our community, our country, our world.

It's true we all differ from one another in many ways, but we need to find the things we have in common and use those as a basis for working together, to make our family, our community, our country, our world, more just, more human and more humane. The principle of solidarity means that we cannot simply ignore injustices in our workplace or our community. We can't, for example, just turn a blind eye to businesses in our community that make their profit on the backs of the poor, or to huge retailers that aggressively fight unionization. We can't just forget the hunger of one billion people in our world, or the scourge of AIDS in Africa, or the debt burden of poor countries.

The common good also obliges us to bear witness to the truth of the Gospel. That is because the spiritual good of others is also our concern. There are people who will only find Christ and the Church through our words and our good example. There are people who will only come to see the evils of abortion and euthanasia through our patient efforts at education. There are people who will only come to see the harm done by our wasteful consumer economy by our example of living differently.

### We Need to Fight Bigotry and Prejudice

One of our favourite pursuits as Canadians is showing how different we are from Americans. Well, whatever the differences may be, one thing that is absolutely certain is that all of us, Canadians or Americans, tend to absorb the attitudes and so the prejudices, of our society. We grow up with them, scarcely aware of them, until some crisis brings them to our attention. The fact is that every one of us has prejudices, against certain races, certain classes of people, particular social groups. Just listen to ourselves speak. How often we betray prejudices against people on social assistance or aboriginal people, for example, in spite of the facts that show us we should stand up for them. Yet the need for us as Christians and Catholics to fight prejudice has never been greater. Thanks to television we have been able to see what prejudice can do: the unspeakable atrocities committed in the Middle East, and in parts of Africa, for example. Prejudice has no place in the heart of a Christian.

We are also capable of religious bigotry. Though we rightly treasure our Catholic faith and should be zealous about helping others see the truth of our faith, one thing we should never forget is that our faith is a gift, a grace from God. There are all sorts of good people who, in spite of their good will, never receive that gift. So we should never behave as if they are just bigots or obstinate people.

### Conclusion

Today's Responsorial Psalm, Psalm 67, with its theme, "Let all the peoples praise you," is a harvest psalm. It sees every harvest as God's gift to all people, and so as an occasion to celebrate our God as the God of all people, the God who wants all people to be saved. Harvest time is a particularly appropriate time to stir up our sense of solidarity and to examine our tendencies to bigotry and prejudice.