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Today's Word

The Twentieth Sunday, Year A (16 August)

Parish Priest: Father Hiroshi Konishi

First Reading: Isaiah 56:1, 6 - 7

Second Reading: Letter to the Romans 11:13 - 15, 22 - 32

Gospel Reading: Matthew 15:21 - 28

From the Three Readings

The common thread running through these three readings is, first and foremost, the “Gentiles.”

“Gentiles” are people who do not believe in the God of Israel. The “Canaanite woman” who appears in the Gospel (Matthew 15:22) is a prime example of a Gentile who had been excluded from God's saving grace. However, as we see in the First Reading, that Gentile is accepted by God. In this way, the temple where God dwells becomes “a house of prayer for all nations” (Isaiah 56:7). In the Second Reading, conversely, Paul declares himself to be “an apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13). Therefore, seeing that the Gentiles are being saved, his fellow Jews are “envious” (v. 14) and long for them to enter into God's saving grace.

Furthermore, the second point common to all three readings is God's desire for salvation and His plan of salvation. In the First Reading, the people of Israel are saved, followed by the Gentiles. In the Second Reading, conversely, the Gentiles are saved, and through this, the Jews are also saved. Both are the result of God's plan of salvation. In the Gospel, at first glance, Jesus' response to the woman may seem cold. This is because Jesus understood that his mission was to work for “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). Nevertheless, the “Canaanite woman” asserted with conviction that God's desire and plan for salvation extend to the Gentiles as well. Jesus' heart was moved by the faith of this woman. All people are included in God's desire and plan for salvation.

Please pay close attention to verses 26 and 27 of the Gospel reading. Verse 26 states, “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs.” The word for “dog” in Greek is “kyon,” which appears to have been a term used to refer to Gentiles. “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet and turn and tear you to pieces” (Matthew 7:6). This was likely a term the Israelites used to insult Gentiles. Here, it is rendered as “puppies” (kyunaron). It may refer not only to literal small dogs but also to small dogs kept as pets in the home. “Bread” symbolizes the blessing of salvation from God. Jesus “gave thanks” (Chapter 14, verse 19)—that is, he offered a prayer of blessing—and multiplied the bread.

Now, let's look at verse 27: "Even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." This woman faced various obstacles in approaching Jesus. She was a woman. She was a Canaanite—a Gentile from Israel's perspective. And she was in such dire straits that she could not help but cry out, "Lord, Son of David" (verse 22).

Furthermore, Jesus presents this woman with yet another hurdle—a test of her faith. The first test is silence: "But Jesus did not answer her a word" (verse 23). The second test comes from the disciples' words, born of their lack of understanding: "Send her away" (verse 23). And the third test is Jesus' own words: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (verse 24). Faced with these words of rejection, the woman falls at His feet and cries out (see verse 25). The fourth trial is Jesus' words, which could also be interpreted as contemptuous: "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (verse 26).

As she endured these many trials, the woman's witty words revealed her heart. For she likened herself to a "little dog." Not only that, but she regarded the people of Israel—a hostile nation—as her "master." Did she know that God's salvation would be extended to the Gentiles through the people of Israel? Or did she humble herself before God by viewing herself as a "little dog"? Perhaps she had faith that if God was saving the people of Israel in order to reveal Himself as God, He would surely demonstrate that He is God to the Gentiles as well.

Jesus was deeply moved by this woman's words. "Your faith is admirable" means "Your faith is great." This woman had firmly grasped the very essence of God's plan of salvation.

In fact, Jesus Himself may have been facing a test of faith. This was because He could not find faith among the people of Israel. His journey to Tyre and Sidon was likely a quest to find people who "lived by faith." He had to test whether true faith existed in the Gentile world. In that sense, it can be described as a test of faith.