



Things to Ponder

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Members All (Based on Matthew 15:21-28)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

After Joseph and Mary found the lost Jesus in the temple, the Gospel relates that He returned home with them and “grew in wisdom and grace.” Rather thought provoking words. They mean that for Jesus, as for any human being, self-understanding evolves through the experience of living. We are never, at any given moment of our lives, a “finished product.” That happens only at the moment of our death; for us, as well as for Jesus.

A careful reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus’ understanding of His mission changed during the course of His ministry. When Jesus first sends out His disciples on mission, He tells them: “Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” In other words, Jesus at first saw His mission to be exclusively to the Jews, not the Gentiles, and certainly not to Canaanites, the mortal enemies of the Jews from whom they wrested the land of Israel after their 40-year sojourn in the desert a thousand years earlier.

In today’s Gospel (Matthew 15:21-28), Jesus reaffirms this earlier understanding of His mission when He states, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But later Jesus remarked, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.” In other words Jesus came to see His salvific mission as going far beyond the Jews to embrace all people of all cultures. When did His vision of His mission change? Perhaps in the very situation that today’s Gospel depicts when Jesus meets the Canaanite woman who asks for a share in Jesus’ healing mission.

Jesus’ words to the woman, “It is not right to take the food of children and throw it to the dogs,” initially strike us as harsh, gruff, aloof, insulting, shocking, intolerable, brutal, and offensive. They don’t jive with our image of Jesus as compassionate, understanding, cheerful, upbeat, kind, friendly, gentle, considerate, tender and loving. This is mainly a problem in translation. The Greek word that Jesus uses for “dogs” is a diminutive form that refers to lap dogs, pet dogs, or puppies, not street dogs. In other words, Jesus used the word in an affectionate way, just as we sometimes use the word “rascal” in an affectionate way. For example, a mother hugs her small son and says, “I love you, you little rascal.” In this loving, almost affectionate way, Jesus reminds her that His mission is only the Jews.

But the Holy Spirit uses this Canaanite woman to move Jesus beyond the initial boundaries of His mission as only to the Jews to the realization, probably almost frightening to Jesus, that He was not just the Savior of the Jews, but also the Savior of all humankind. This is the moment when Jesus moves from His understanding that His mission is only to the Jews, to a deeper understanding that, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." And it was the tenacious faith of a woman and the work of the Holy Spirit that brought Jesus to this new understanding of the broader scope of His mission.

By extending His salvific blessing to a non-Jew, Jesus fulfills Isaiah's prophecy that comprises today's first reading (Isaiah 56:1, 6-7), "the foreigners who attach themselves to God, who observe what is right and do what is just will also be welcomed and attended by God.....for God's house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples"

We need to be reminded today that membership in the house of God is open to all: Jews, Gentiles, Protestants, and Muslims. Ever since Jesus stretched His arms on the cross in the saving embrace of all of humankind, no one person, no one group can claim an exclusive right to God, to God's reign and to access thereof. Because of Jesus and the love of God, the mercy of God and the forgiveness of God that has been revealed in Him, the mystery of salvation and redemption is open to all. Members only? No, members all!

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