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20th Sunday in Ordinary Time - 20 August 2023

Gerard Moore

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20 August 2023

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reflection by Gerard Moore

Introduction

Our readings today are an extended meditation on who belongs within the reign of God. Not only is each of the readings in synchronicity around this question, but each passage extends our understanding and challenges the limits we place on God.

Penitential Act

Use one of the *Roman Missal* texts or this optional litany form:

Lord Jesus, you came to save all humankind. Lord have mercy.

You show us the love of the Father. Christ have mercy.

You are the mercy of God. Lord have mercy.

Collect

The Oration

O God, who have prepared for those who love you
good things which no eye can see,
fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love,
so that, loving you in all things and above all things,
we may attain your promises,
which surpass every human desire.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.

The meaning of this ancient prayer emerges from the link between the 'good things which no eye can see', the love of God above all things, and the acquisition of the divine promises which surpass all human longing. The faithful live within the revelation of God's love and goodness. The things which are seen, chiefly God's self-revelation in the incarnation but also inclusive of the Church, the liturgy, and creation, point to the good things beyond sight which will be fully revealed in eternal life. In response, the faithful seek to love God in and above all things, in line with the biblical command. Love is the first and deepest response of the Christian to God.

Through such an all-encompassing love for God, the baptised seek to attain eternal life, the promises which are beyond human desire.

Collect commentary by Gerard Moore: The discussion of the collect, slightly adapted, was composed by me for the Canadian liturgical journal Celebrate! (Novalis Press). My thanks to them for permission to reuse the material.

First Reading

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

The prophet declares that salvation is open to all the peoples, who are invited to pray and worship on God's holy mountain.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 66:2-3, 5-6, 8. R. v. 8

O God, let all the nations praise you!

The psalmist calls for everyone to praise the Lord. The presumption is that if you praise the Lord with your life, you will be righteous and God will hear your prayers.

Second Reading

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

The mercy of God is not to be conceived of in a confined or constrained way.

Gospel Reading

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus is confronted by a determined woman of wit and passion who seeks a cure for her ailing daughter.

Reflection

As a commentator I must admit that this gospel is one of my favourite readings so you may need to excuse some enthusiasm. The setting and the dialogue are compelling. Jesus is in territory that is designated as pagan, with Jewish and non-Jewish peoples inhabiting the same areas. It is unknown why Jesus withdrew there, and so does not appear to be part of a strategic mission endeavour.

He meets a determined and feisty woman and ignores her. True to their form with blind beggars and other afflicted, the disciples want her silenced and sent packing. The instincts of those closest to Jesus remain dull and uninspiring. It might be thought that these men of humble background would recognise the poor and attend to them. Consistently they fall short of this. They wish to hold Jesus to themselves and their expectations: this is a salutary lesson for us all.

There is more to the story, as parts of it are more obscure to our age. The story shows several strengths in the unnamed mother. She is determined, she seeks help for her daughter not for herself, she does Jesus homage, she is humble enough to make petition, she has travelled to him and sought him out. She has some Australian appeal in that she is witty and does not take stock responses as of value: this is a woman with some zest and a deal of cheek.

We do not so quickly recognise the negatives she is overcoming. She is a woman. There is no man present to defend her or give credibility. She has a daughter, not a son: a daughter is not necessarily seen as a blessing. She is a foreigner and not a Jew: she falls outside the mission of Jesus to the Jewish people. Her daughter is sick in a time when sickness was related to sinfulness: what sin was involved here and was it related to the mother? She is embarrassingly desperate, travelling to see Jesus outside her comfort zone: she would have made those around her uncomfortable. Those closest to Jesus do not recognise any of these features as aspects of the reign of God.

The Gospel writer gives her centre stage and full voice as she pushes back at the master healer. Jesus speaks almost disparagingly, but she replies that in a good house the house dogs too are well tended. Jesus may have been testing her faith, giving voice to common themes of Jewish/pagan discussions, or placing his disciples in an extreme position before reversing it. The text is unclear, but the dialogue is sharp and appears abrasive.

Her faith wins out, her daughter is cured. Yet there is more to the narrative than this. As much as this is a healing story, it is also a call for the early Christians to go beyond their habitual divisions and boundaries. Salvation belongs to all, and Jewish and gentile differences are of no account. In the unnamed mother, the strong woman, we have a new clarity that there are no bounds to the mission of the Lord.

We also have a new teacher, one more reliable than the pre-resurrection disciples. In the liturgical tradition there is a teaching that all our prayers are inspired by the Scriptures. The Canaanite woman is the one person in the scriptures who makes petition saying *eleison kyrie*, have mercy on me Lord. As we pray the *Kyrie eleison*, the Lord have mercy, at the beginning of the Mass, we are echoing her words. We have been instructed to pray by the foreign woman who sought out Jesus at great peril and exposure for a sick girl child. As we begin the Mass, we echo her words: she is one of our models for prayer, she is our teacher.

This is a great reading.

It is well framed by the first reading, the psalm and the extract from Paul. The psalm refrain summarises it well: *Let all the nations praise you*. This is sung after hearing from the prophet Isaiah, himself a priest of the temple, who is calling up a strand in the Jewish tradition that invites all nations to worship God in truth. It is a reminder to the people of Israel that God is a God of all the nations and not exclusive to the people of Israel, while also allowing that Israel is the pathway for the nations to life in God. In this there is a challenge to both the peoples of the earth and to Israel. In a parallel, but somewhat convoluted fashion, Paul is teaching the same point in the

Letter to the Romans. The mercy of God is not to be conceived of in a confined or constrained way.

It is very instructive for our engagement with the social and political currents today for people of faith to recognise that one of the great Christian teachers was thought of in terms of a secondary citizen, a sinner, a foreigner, a single mother in a desperate situation, an anonymous woman.



Let all the nations praise God.

Ps 67:5

Prayer of the Faithful

Introduction

Like the unnamed mother in the gospel, let us ask God to grant our needs with faith and perseverance.

Petitions

We pray for Pope Francis and the leaders of our Church. May they persevere in the journey towards the Synod on Synodality and keep on asking God for help.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for all leaders in political, economic and all public spheres. May they be brought to understand that all power comes from God and wisdom can also come from the lowly.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for all those who teach the faith: parents, catechists, teachers, clergy and others in ministry. May they always listen first to the gospel and know it in their hearts so that their witness to the faith is true.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for all those who feel that they are on the outside and cannot ask for God to fulfill their needs. May we as a community pray for them and find ways to include them in our lives of faith.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for all single mothers who cry out for the needs of their children. May they be heard and generously assisted to achieve all that they need for their families.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who have died that they may be welcomed into the fullness of God's kingdom. May those who mourn be blessed with comfort.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

Conclusion

Loving God, there are no constraints on your mercy and so we know that our needs will be fulfilled. We ask in the name of Jesus, our Lord, and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Music selections by Alessio Loiacono and Chris deSilva

Title	AOV1	AOV2	AOVK	CWB	CWBII	GA
All people that on earth do dwell	25			613	448	533
All the earth proclaim the Lord				611	447	
All the ends of the earth	76					420
All you nations, sing out your joy				616	347	353
Alleluia! Sing to Jesus	191			619	449	371
Christ is the made the sure foundation				640		482
Come to the water (Andersen)	74				473	
Come to the water (Foley)						403
Diverse in culture, nation, race						520
Eye has not seen	146					466
Forth in the peace of Christ we go				681	489	495
Gather us in					501	
In Christ there is no east or west				721	519	
May the feet of God walk with you			67			
O Lord hear my prayer	17					431
The fullness of God		62				
The light of Christ	186			826		405
There's a wideness in God's mercy				838	624	
We are many parts	86					523
Your hands, O Lord, in days of old					129	

Psalms Selected by Chris deSilva and Angela McCarthy

Psalm 66: *O God, let all the nations praise you!*

	CWB	JOBA	LPA
Psalm 66	310	p. 86	p. 132

Music selections by Michael Mangan

The bread of life (SHOF) [Communion]