

Homily based on the readings from August 20, 2023 (Isaiah 56.1, 6-7; Romans 11.13-15, 29-32; Matthew 15.21-28)

It is easy to forget how much hostility the Children of Israel experienced on a daily basis. They were surrounded by countless other nations, many of whom regularly attempted to destroy or enslave them: the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, to name a few – to say nothing of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Romans. The threats they faced were not merely physical. One of the main imperatives of the Old Testament was that the Israelites retain the integrity of their own religious tradition, rejecting the idolatry of the peoples that surrounded them. Nevertheless, there is another essential theme within the Old Testament that we must not overlook: the Lord is the God of *all* nations.

Much of the Old Testament is dedicated to God's unique relationship with the Children of Israel: how he delivered them from captivity in Egypt, how he fed and sheltered them in the wilderness, how he brought

them safely into the promised land. The commandments contained in the first five books of the Bible provide a roadmap – not only for how to live, but for how to worship. Many of these precepts focus on the Temple, the holy site in Jerusalem where every sacrifice to the Lord was required to be offered. By law, no foreigners were allowed to set foot within the main structure of the Temple.

Nevertheless, even before the coming of Christ, the prophets of Israel recognized that the Lord longed for a relationship with *all* the peoples of the world. Our first reading, from the Prophet Isaiah, makes this point explicitly:

The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,  
ministering to him,  
loving the name of the LORD,  
and becoming his servants – ...  
them I will bring to my holy mountain

[in other words, the Temple on Mount Zion]

and make joyful in my house of prayer;

their burnt offerings and sacrifices

will be acceptable on my altar,

for my house shall be called

a house of prayer for *all* peoples.

Similarly, today's Psalm expresses longing for the day when *all* nations will worship the Lord:

So may your way be known upon earth;

among *all* nations, your salvation. ...

May the peoples praise you, O God;

may *all* the peoples praise you!

God created *all* human beings in his image and likeness. He wants *all* human beings to know, love, and serve him. The promise of the coming Messiah was not *only* to liberate the Jewish people from their

oppression, but to extend the relationship the Lord already had with *them* to the rest of humanity.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus reached out in direct and surprising ways to numerous people beyond the Jewish community. Today's Gospel presents one such interaction – between Jesus and a Canaanite woman, a member of a local tribe known for worshipping a pantheon of pagan gods. Yet in this particular woman, Jesus recognized a deep and abiding faith – as well as the passionate love of a mother for her child. In truth, Jesus was not only sent “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” but to everyone who called upon the name of the Lord.

Following his example, Christ's followers have the responsibility to invite all nations to worship the Living God. Saint Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, reminds us explicitly that he is “the apostle to the Gentiles.” Despite being “a Hebrew born of Hebrews,” his mission – to which he dedicated his life and for which he ultimately gave his life – was to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ among the non-Jewish

peoples of the world. Unlike his forefathers, Saint Paul was not defending himself against the unprovoked attacks of hostile nations, but willingly subjected himself to whatever abuse they chose to inflict upon him.

As Christians today, it is still our duty to share the message of Christ with anyone who has not yet heard it. We are no longer calling people to offer sacrifices in the Temple at Jerusalem – which, in any event, was destroyed almost 2000 years ago – but to partake in the eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That sacrifice took place – once and for all – when Christ offered up his own life on the Cross for our salvation. Each one of us is present at that same sacrifice every single time we come to Mass. To quote the fathers of the Second Vatican Council:

At the Last Supper, on the night when he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. He did this to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until he should come again. (SC 47)

This is the sacrifice in which all God's children – from every tribe, language, people, and nation – are called to participate. This is the “holy mountain” that God is inviting each one of us to ascend. This is the truth to which we are called to give witness, every single hour of every single day. Like Saint Paul, we may find ourselves interacting with individuals or groups that are hostile to this message – or even to us personally – but we must never cease to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ – not until we can truly say that his “way [is] known upon earth; among *all* nations, [his] salvation.”