

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 14, 2011

The importance of interreligious dialogue in today's world should be evident to everyone. Yet when Christian theologians try to find New Testament foundations for such dialogue, they come up against such texts as John 14:6 ("I am the way and the truth and the life") and Acts 4:12 ("nor is there any other name... by which we are to be saved."). Christians must take these texts seriously because they represent the basic thrust of the New Testament. Matthew's surprising narrative about Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman, however, may offer a point of entry for Christians committed to interreligious dialogue.

This encounter has many surprising features. It takes place in "the region of Tyre and Sidon," outside the traditional territory of the chosen people. The woman who approaches Jesus is described as a "Canaanite." In this way Matthew shows her relation to the ancient pagan inhabitants of the area and very much an outsider to Jesus' people and movement. Moreover, as a Gentile woman in a very patriarchal society, she shows courage and boldness in approaching a Jewish teacher like Jesus, calling him "Son of David" and requesting him to heal her daughter.

Jesus' role in the initial stages of the dialogue is also surprising. He responds to her request initially in an uncharacteristic and unattractive way by announcing that his mission is "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Matters grow worse when he refuses her plea by lumping her together with "the dogs," a pejorative term applied by some Jews to non-Jews. As the story proceeds, these two statements serve as the occasion for highlighting the Canaanite woman's faith in Jesus.

The greatest surprise is that through dialogue Jesus seems to change his mind and comes to display great openness to the faith of this non-Jewish woman. This is the only debate in the Gospels in which Jesus seems to lose an argument. One can interpret Jesus' behavior as "only a test" of the woman's faith. But one can also find in it an instance where through dialogue Jesus learns something and changes his attitude and behavior. He appears to come to understand better that his mission includes not only his own people, Israel, but also outsiders like the Canaanite woman and her daughter. While the primary goal of interreligious

dialogue is better mutual understanding, it often happens that through such dialogue we come to understand ourselves better and make changes for the good of all.

On the level of dialogue, the Christian must listen to what the Spirit is saying outside the formal structures of institutional Christianity. The fact is, the grace of God is active, the Spirit is at work, in persons and situations that have no tangible commitment to Christ. The Christian, then, must listen, for example, to the Spirit speaking in the arts and science. The Christian must listen to the Spirit as she speaks through every discipline that touches the human person. The Christian must listen to the Spirit as she speaks through the Jews. For, in the affirmation of St. Paul, "God has not rejected his people whom God foreknew."

On the level of service, the Christian must bring the compassionate Christ, the servant Christ, to a sick and suffering society. The meeting place of God and God's people is not only inside the church. Often it is a stinking slum or a bug-invested tenement. In point of fact, we shall not *bring* Christ there. Christ *is* there – wherever there's a person in need. But they will not *know* Christ is there, will not see his face, unless we are there, unless they see the face of Christ in our face.

In his address opening the second session of Vatican II on September 29, 1963, Pope Paul VI addressed himself to the bishops of the world: "the Church will build a bridge to the contemporary world." He made it clear that "the Church looks at the world with profound understanding, with the sincere intention not of conquering it but of serving it." He listed categories of human beings on whom the Church looks with particular solicitude: "The poor, the needy, the afflicted, the hungry, the suffering sorrowing." He stressed that the Church looks to "people of culture and learning... to defend their liberty," to "the workers" and their "mission to create a new world," to "the leaders of nations" and their power to "make of humanity a single city," to "the new generation of youth desirous of living and expressing themselves," to "the new peoples now coming to self-awareness, independence, and civil organization." To all without exception he proclaimed Christianity's "good news of salvation and hope."

Here, my sisters and brothers in Christ, here is the mission of Christ Our Hope Parish. Here is the field of our service.