



## August 14, 2011

# The Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

“...my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” —Isaiah 56:7

Dear Friends;

Anthropologists tell us that religion begins with the idea of dividing the world into the pure and impure. It is a way of separating us from those who are foreign, different or who have other values. It draws the lines between insiders and outsiders. Fr Richard Rohr says, “On that lie, the whole structure builds.” That is a toxic form of religion as opposed to a healthy spirituality.

The idea of One God for all people evolved over time. The idea of a personal God is something that evolved in the Middle East and the West, but did not in the Far East. One of the challenges in bringing the Gospel to parts of Asia is those languages often do not have a word that is equivalent to what we mean when we say “God.”

In the sixteenth century there was a great outburst of missionary activity that took Christians to India, China and Japan. The Jesuits, Franciscans and Dominicans all were spreading the Gospel throughout the Far East. The Jesuits were the first in these areas and the most creative. At that time the Jesuits had adapted the message to the culture—wearing the local clothing, they celebrated the sacraments in the vernacular, and using the art and architecture of the indigenous culture for places of worship. This led to some strife between the different orders and their missions.

In Japan, the Jesuits found that there was no word for God as we understand it. So the Jesuit missionaries translated the word “God” with the best equivalent that they could find. Jealous of the missionary success of the Jesuit missions and suspicious of their adaptations to local culture the Dominicans and Franciscans reported to Rome what they did not like. This disagreement now is called “The Rites Controversy.”

The pope at the time was a Dominican. And he sided with these conservative complainers. One result was Catholic missionaries had to use the Latin word for God. In Japan when you did that it translated in Japanese to mean “the great lie.”

The conclusion of the Rites Controversy was disastrous for missionary activity in Asia. By insisting on Latin and European cultural expressions of the Gospel missionaries began to be seen as agents of colonialism. The faith became to be seen as the first step in eradicating the local culture and absorbing it into the colonizing culture. In effect Japan and China would now isolate themselves and expel foreign missionaries. Only later will missionaries again realize that their job is to sow the seed of the Gospel and let it take root and form in a new culture.

Ancient Israel over time began to realize that God was not their sole possession. God was not just God of Israel but God of all. But that insight was born out of the experience that a foreign power and King was the one who would liberate them from their enslavement to Babylon. In fact Isaiah would call the Persian King “God’s Anointed,” or as the Hebrew would say, *Mesiah*—Messiah. That was a religion shattering moment.

Jesus in today’s Gospel also has a consciousness shattering moment of recognition in today’s Gospel. Jesus encounters the Canaanite woman and typical of his culture’s biases ignores her. But she will not be put off. And so Jesus speaks harshly to her and even uses the epithet that Jews of his time used for Gentiles—dog. Yet the woman’s confidence in Jesus will not be shut down. And she becomes the only one in the Gospels who gets one up on Jesus when she says “Even the dogs get the scraps that fall from the table.” You can almost hear Jesus say “touché.”

As the Gospel message begins to spread after the resurrection, the early Christians will recognize that the Good News is not just for the Jews but all people. It all began with this moment in Jesus’ ministry. And they will decide that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish in order to receive Jesus. And the Gospel will flourish in many cultures and take on shape in many different languages and customs.

Today as in the past we need to be open to transmitting the Gospel without imposing our culture. To share the Gospel is the work of missionary activity. However to impose my particular piety, culture and language is colonialism or imperialism. Today the biggest theological challenge in the Church is to learn the difference between mission and colonizing. The struggle over the new translation of the Missal, in many ways reflects the Rites Controversy of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Can we share the Gospel without changing others into Romans, Americans, Spaniards, English, or French? We must be able to recognize, as did Isaiah and Jesus, the faith of those who are different from us and let them incarnate the Gospel in their own unique way.

Peace

*Fr Ron*