



## 20<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A – August 20, 2017

There is a story told about Mahatma Gandhi (1868-1948), an Indian civil rights leader, famous for his non-violent approach to seeking freedom and equality for people in India. In his autobiography he tells how, during his student days, he read the Gospels and saw in the teachings of Jesus the answer to the major problem facing the people of India, the caste system. Seriously considering to embrace the Christian faith, Gandhi attended church one Sunday morning intending to talk to the pastor about his idea. On entering the church, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and told him to go away and worship with his own people - his own kind. Gandhi left the church and never returned. He said, "If Christians have a caste system too, I might as well remain a Hindu."

The belief that God's blessings are somehow limited to people of certain tribes or cultures or social status has been around for a very long time. Such a belief was very much alive in the time of Jesus. When Jesus said in today's gospel passage (Matthew 15:21-28), "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel", he was expressing a popular belief in his time. His purpose was to correct its false claim. He did not agree with it or He would never have spoken to the Canaanite woman. He would just have sent her away like the Apostles wanted him to do. According to them, she didn't belong.

Every people and every culture has a handful of such prejudices and myths – from the myth of the Jews as the only chosen people of God to that of no salvation outside the Catholic Church; from the prejudice of the caste system in India to that of racial superiority in Nazi Germany; from the myth of the superiority of men over women to that of the superiority of Western culture.

It took the active intervention of a complete outsider, a Canaanite woman, to create the awareness among early Jewish Christians that their belief in the exclusive divine prerogatives of the Jewish people did not stand up to reason. It was not part of God's plan. So Jesus set them straight. Probably you and I owe the fact that we are Christians today to the heroism of this unnamed woman who tore down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us in the first reading (Is 56:1,6-7) that the family of God does not exclude anyone. God says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." All people means – ALL people. God does not exclude anyone, and neither should we.

Jesus came to tear down man-made religious walls and build up God-made bridges so that his kingdom would not be divided by human prejudice or anything else. When you look at all the various denominations in Christianity (33,000 plus) and all the religions that are not Christian, it's clear – there's still much work to be done. We can't change the whole world, but we can change the part of the world in which we live.

How do you see the kingdom of God on earth today? Is it like the kingdom of God in heaven? Or has it become something else over time? There are "embers in the ashes" (*Abbot Martin Werlen, OSB Paulist Press - 2013*). You are one of those "embers" chosen by God. There is still hope. We can "*Fan them into Fire*".

