

Every once in a while, in the Gospels we hear words rolling off the lips of Jesus that seem to be anything but “Christ-like.” And today is one of those days.

In the Gospel we just heard, Jesus had withdrawn from his own place of Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is an area north of the Jewish Holy Land; it is a place where there were very few Jews; it was Gentile territory. And here a Gentile woman approached Him. But she was not just any Gentile; she was a Canaanite - a member of the pagan nation that were historically rivals and enemies of the Jewish people. This Canaanite woman came to Jesus, a Jew, asking that he would heal her daughter from a demon. His response, though, was not what we would expect. At first Jesus ignored her; then He spoke about her, apparently while she was standing right there, saying: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”; finally, Jesus seemed to insult her openly: “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”

Considering that the only thing we know about this woman is that she was a Canaanite, we can be tempted to think that Jesus responded to her in this way because she was a foreigner, because she was not a member of Jesus’ own people. But that would be racism. Now, since we know that racism is a grave sin and since we know that Jesus, the Divine Son of God is sinless, not capable of committing sin, His response to the woman can not be attributed to racism. In

fact, the way that Jesus responded to the woman, especially the way that he soon granted her request and healed her daughter, [His response] was instead a rejection of racism and unjust discrimination. Jesus' response to the woman was a sign that the love and compassion of God are freely given to all people.

Now that's a big jump, so let me take a step back.

The first words that Jesus speaks in today's Gospel are these: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The mission of Jesus during His life here on earth was to fulfill God's covenant with his people, to establish a new covenant by His death and resurrection - a covenant that leads us back to God. But this covenant was never meant to be exclusive to the Hebrew people. They were chosen by God not to be the only people with a relationship with God, but to be the people who would lead all the other nations of the world to that same kind of relationship with God. All the nations were to come to the true and right worship of God through the example of Israel. Isaiah says this in the first reading today: "The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, ministering to him, loving the name of the LORD, and becoming his servant... them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." God's plan was always that His

people Israel would lead all the other nations to worship, so that all people would worship God in Spirit and in Truth.

The Canaanite woman, like many other faithful foreigners we hear about in the Gospel, is a sign that the plan of God was beginning to be fulfilled. Listen again to her words of faith: “Lord, help me.” “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.” She was joining herself to the Lord. She was loving the name of the Lord. And so Jesus recognized her faith and granted her request that her daughter be healed. He extended God’s love and mercy to a foreigner, to a Canaanite.

A few weeks ago, it may have seemed strange to hear a homily defending Jesus from a possible charge of racism; it may have been out of place to focus on God’s desire that all nations and peoples be united in worship of Him. A few weeks ago, many of us may have thought that, as a society, we are moving beyond the ancient sins of racism and division. But, the events in Charlottesville last weekend and the similar demonstrations that continue to be planned show us that we have not come so far as we may have thought. These events show us that the sin of racism continues to rear its ugly head.

Just this week I had a conversation with a man who related to me how, as a child, he was not allowed to enter into certain Catholic churches, because he is black. How wonderful it would be if those sins of 50 years ago were relegated to the past; but as long as the KKK and neo-Nazis and white nationalists continue to march on the streets of our nation, we can be sure that the sin of racism has not yet passed away.

And so, as people of faith, as people who believe that God's plan is to unite all people in worship of Him, how must we respond to these sins of racism and unjust discrimination? Certainly it will do no good to respond with more hate or with more violence or with unforgiveness. Instead we must pray! We must beg God for the grace to respond to ignorance with truth, to respond to violence with non-violence, to respond to hatred and bigotry with respect and with love. Truth, non-violence, respect, and love - these are the virtues that can bring about conversion, both within our own hearts and within the hearts of the people we meet.

The Lord's desire for us is that we may be one people, one people united in worship of God and united in love for one another. Let us pray for the grace to see in Jesus the Divine Lord who can heal the wounds of sin and division, who can cast out the demons that seek to destroy our society. May we see in Jesus the Divine Lord who can lead us to be one people journeying together toward salvation.