

Fr. John Sassani
Homily Given August 14, 2011
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Liturgical Year A

My father is the son of an Italian immigrant; my mother was the granddaughter of Irish immigrants. My father's parents told him to marry an Italian; my mother's parents told her to marry Irish. I should have told the Bishop at my ordination that I come from two disobedient people!

I don't often think about the prejudice that lurks in my own past. When I encounter it; it's startling. But - it's not nearly as startling as it is in Jesus today.

The Canaanite woman was a pagan; her family lived in Israel before it was Israel, before the Jewish people came to Israel after the Exodus, three thousand years ago. The dialogue between Jesus and the woman is shocking - it's something Matthew should have edited out - except that it can't be edited out. Israel is God's chosen people, and that's unchangeable. And at Jesus' time, they were suffering from foreign occupation and a king who was a puppet of the Roman Governor, which incited the Jewish people to consider rebellion.

Jesus' mission happens in this context - he has come to save the chosen people. But he encountered this woman, and likewise the Roman centurion whose servant was sick, and Jesus found real faith in unlikely and unexpected places.

This provokes something in Jesus - we might call it discernment. There is a choice between two goods - to be the Savior of Israel - or a broader view, more inclusive, not *just* the Jewish people, but the Canaanites, Irish, Italians, anyone, everyone who believes that he offers life as God intended life to be.

This is part of the message for you and me: life is complicated. Our choices are sometimes black and white, good or bad. But often, our choices are between two goods. One is better, and we need help to see which one is better, and we need help to choose it, especially when it is unconventional.

The Holy Spirit was working in the Canaanite woman and in Jesus, helping each of them to discover God's will and to choose it. In her, the Holy Spirit helped her to cross the line to ask this Jewish rabbi to hear her need and help her daughter. In him, the Holy Spirit helped him to cross the line to broaden the scope of his understanding and to see the bigger picture. Both this pagan woman and the King of the Jews discover the bigger picture that God was revealing.

We are called - in difficult political and economic times, with a burgeoning war in Iraq and Afghanistan and with trouble in our families and workplaces - to see not just good and bad but to see opportunities for the unexpected choice between two goods, one of which is better for others, as Jesus our Lord and the Canaanite woman - our sister in faith - discovered together.