

Aug 20, 2017    HOMILY for the 20<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF YEAR A, given at the Cathedral of St. Matthew by Fr. Christopher

Not infrequently the readings from the scriptures are very apropos of our present times. Certainly that is so with today's readings relating to foreigners.

Not that long ago I read an article about a refugee family from Syria that was brought to this country and welcomed into a mid-Western community, with a promise of financial and other needed help for a year. It turned out that the father and mother were illiterate, had difficulty learning a new language, and were unskilled for most work available in the town. Their child quickly adjusted to the new life, learning English while going to school. At year's end, the parents were still not able to support themselves. Those who sponsored them did not feel that they could continue to provide for all their needs with no end in sight. The couple wanted to return to Syria even though it was war-torn, because it was the only home they knew. You can imagine what the child wanted. Would he want to go with them or to stay here?

We can read and hear almost every day of people who came to our country to find work and start a new life. But those here illegally may be rounded up any time and transported back to their country, sometimes leaving children behind. Such is the world we live in today. People risk their lives, and quite a few die, fleeing from wars, threats of persecution, and death threats from famine or gang wars. If you were in their place, what kind of welcome would you hope waited you – if you survived the journey?

The Law and the prophets of Israel often reminded their people to have concern for the foreigners who lived among them. In Leviticus, the Law says, "You shall not oppress an alien; you will know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt." If you are not Native American, you and I or our ancestors came to this country as strangers. Sadly some were brought here as slaves. Within one hundred years after the European immigration started, the population became predominantly white along the eastern seaboard. Over the next century it spread across this continent, with the native peoples being restricted to reservations. One can see how that would lead to a mentality of white supremacy for some people. There is no place for it any more. It is so contrary to the same humanity, homo sapiens, we all share. What could be more contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died for all people, whatever their caste, culture, race or religion, even for white supremacists. We have to pray for a conversion of heart in all of us, for it is easy for us to have prejudices we are blind to, or do not want to admit.

The Israelites, conscious that they were God's chosen people peculiarly his own, strove to preserve their unique identity by tightly knit communities and territories, afraid of dilution of it by mixing with pagans. Their prophets however were not inhibited by a ghetto mentality. We heard in the first reading Isaiah speak in God's name that his house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples. The prophet Elijah helped the Sidonian widow and son to survive the famine, but not the widows of Israel. Elisha healed the leprosy of the Syrian general Naaman, but none of the lepers of Israel.

St. Paul struggled with solving the division among the Jews over recognizing Jesus of Nazareth as their awaited Messiah and at the same time allowing the Gentiles to accept him as their Lord and Savior. His answer is challenging. Did you hear him say that "God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all?" Not that we can blame God for our rebelliousness and sinfulness. All the sons and daughters of Adam know the same divided self within, and the divisions we make outside ourselves with other.

In the gospel we just heard, Jesus seemed to have a prejudice against the Canaanite women who asked for help. He ignored her first, then explained that his mission was to the lost sheep of Israel. She won him over by her chutzpah, her humility and her faith. He answered her petition, expelled the demon from her daughter. Recall that Jesus healed the servant of the Roman centurion, an officer of a foreign occupation army. Jesus was moved to respond to strong faith wherever he saw it.

That we are all in need of God's mercy is a great leveling ground for unity however different we are. We should have mutual respect for each other as we strive to grow in living the law of love Jesus gave us and demonstrated to us. By our sins we make ourselves foreigners to God's kingdom of love and peace. By the blood of Jesus we are restored to peace with God and unity with brothers and sisters of every kind. May the people praise you, O God. May all the peoples praise you. AMEN and AMEN