

JESUS CHRIST, THE ONLY CURE FOR THE GUILT THAT CRIPPLES OUR SPIRIT

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Homily of the 20th Sunday of the Year, August 14, 2011
Isa. 56:1, 6-7, Ps. 66, Rom. 11:13-15, 29-32, Matt. 15:21-28

“He answered ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’” (Matt. 15:24).

This was how Jesus responded to a pagan woman who begged him to cure her daughter, who was “severely possessed by a demon” (Matt. 15:22). He knew that his mission during his earthly life was only to the Jews. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 15:24). His mission to the Gentiles and to the entire world began only after Pentecost. His mission had two phases, that to the Jews, and then later that to the whole world. Even after Pentecost, though, in the beginning, his disciples preached only to Jews. Although Philip preached to an Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-39) and Peter preached to the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48), in reality the Ethiopian was a Jew or a Jewish proselyte who had come to Jerusalem to pray in the temple and was returning home reading the prophet Isaiah when Philip met him, and Cornelius was a lover of Judaism, “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God” (Acts 10:2). The Christians “who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews” (Acts 11:19).

The second phase of the mission of the Church began when some of these disciples, “men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20). It was then that they began to fulfill Jesus’ great commission to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). It was these newly converted pagans in Antioch who were called “Christians” for the first time (Acts 11:26). The name “Christian” began with them.

Isaiah prophesies today that the day will come when the Gentiles too will serve the Lord: “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord ... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isa. 56:6-7).

St. Paul also announces today that the time of the Gentile mission has now begun, for the Jews as a body have refused to accept Christ. He therefore turned to the Gentiles to preach to them the mystery of God's salvation that is in Jesus Christ, his only Son. Speaking to the Gentiles about the Jews, he says, "You were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience" (Rom. 11:30). In other words, since the Jews as a body are now disobedient and refuse to believe in Jesus Christ, the Gentiles, who were formerly also disobedient and rebellious, are now receiving the gospel of Christ and the mercy of God.

This is our situation now. We are those Gentiles who are now receiving the gospel and spreading it to others. The time of preaching only to Jews ended almost two thousand years ago. We now live in the age of the Church's Gentile mission, a mission to the entire world, to all peoples, languages, and people groups (Matt. 28:19), a mission to every creature (Mark 16:15), unto the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

What Jesus did today for this pagan woman is what he wants to do now for all who believe in him with a simple and humble faith like hers. He cured with a simple word her daughter who was "severely possessed by a demon" (Matt. 15:22). Jesus' cures were understood by the early Christians as vivid, exterior, dramatic demonstrations of what his power does in our spirit when we believe in him, namely freeing us from our sins and from the guilt that cripples our spirit and depresses us. Guilt is our worst problem and illness, and only God can cure it. Only God can forgive our sins and relieve us of the guilt which cripples our spirit with depression, and he does so through the death of his Son on the cross, when we put our faith in him. Theodoret of Cyr wrote: "For since those who were enslaved to sin were liable to the penalties of sin, he himself, exempt from sin though he was and walking in the path of perfect righteousness, underwent the punishment of sinners ... By taking the slap in the face, and thus suffering the violence, corrections and blows that were due to us, he proclaimed our freedom" (*Breviary*, Monday, 19th Week of the Year).

This is our liberation from punishment, especially the interior punishment of guilt and depression for having sinned or fallen into imperfections. Christ freed us from this by suffering himself this alienation from God in our place when he felt totally abandoned by his Father on the cross. That is why he cried out from the depths of his heart, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). He was bearing all our sins, and was suffering the alienation from God that they cause, as a substitute for us, to fulfill and satisfy divine justice on our behalf and so free us from having to suffer this alienation from God. Truly, he

suffered the Father's curse for us due to our sins, a curse we should have suffered, thus shielding us from it. It hit him instead of us. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by having become a curse for us" (Ga. 3:13). He bore the curse decreed by the law for our sins on our behalf, to free us from it. "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole" (Isa. 53:5). He was our substitute in bearing our punishment instead of us. The punishment that we should have suffered for our sins, he suffered, instead of us, thus setting us free from punishment and guilt, when we believe in him. He served our sentence for us, and so has set us free.

Jesus frees all who believe in him from eternal death in hell. He saves us from perdition and gives us a new and risen life. He illuminates us through his resurrection and gives us, from the Father, the gift of the Holy Spirit, to unite us with the Trinity. And he gives us hope of eternal life with him in the fullness of the kingdom of his Father, where we will shine like the sun (Matt. 13:43).

This is the salvation of man, sent by the Father, through his only Son, in the Holy Spirit. This is a message of life for everyone, for every people, people group, language, and culture, unto the ends of the earth. It is the responsibility of the Church to preach this salvation in all the languages of man, to evangelize every people and culture on earth. There is no other means of salvation given to man by God but this (Acts 4:12; John 14:6).

To receive this salvation, you have to hear (or read) this proclamation and believe it in your heart. Then you have to be baptized and enter the Church, where you will receive the sacraments of penance (Matt. 18:18; John 20:23) and the Eucharist, through which you will experience freedom from guilt and the glorious love of God in your heart. Thus will you begin to live a new life. You should then share this good news of salvation with your relatives, friends, and neighbors, unto the ends of the earth. This is God's only plan for man's salvation. To proclaim this to all the world is the mission of the Church.