

## HOMILY ON THE THIRD DAY OF THE ASIAN MISSION CONGRESS

October 21, 2006; Chiang Mai, Thailand

Readings: Acts 13, 44-49; Mark 7:24-30

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Your Eminences...

Your Excellencies...

My brother Priests...

My dear Religious Sisters and Brothers...

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ...

The encounter between Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician gives us an insight into the way the story of Jesus develops as he continued his ministry. The gentile woman approached him, seeking that her daughter be freed from demonic possession. She did not approach in faith. She came to him in desperate need. "The children should be fed first, because it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the little dogs", says Jesus. Here, the Lord is taking up the narrative of the Jews who take pride in their being the chosen people of God. To the children of Israel, the gentiles were "dogs". That would have put an end to the dialogue, but the woman persisted. She took up the story of Jesus, and inserted her own story into his. "Even little dogs under the table eat the scraps from the children".

Jesus did not stop the woman from continuing the story. He allowed her to be part of his story. Her story is part of the story we tell about Jesus. If Jesus had insisted on the story the children of Israel tell about themselves, this woman would not have been part of the Gospel. And neither will anyone of us ever hear of what Jesus did. We would not have become part of the story of Jesus.

The same dynamics is present in the First Reading. The Apostles could not get through to their own people. They were rejected outright, and so they decided they must go to the Gentiles. If the Apostles had thought the story of Jesus is worthy only to be told to their own kind, to people of their own culture and of their own faith that would have ended the story. But they went on to the ends of the earth, so that the story may not end.

When Jesus allowed the story of the woman to become part of his, he did not change his story, he simply allowed it to continue. When we allow another culture to become part of the story of Jesus, we bring the story forward, we allow it to continue. The history of the Church in Asia told last Thursday, that was a continuation of the story of Jesus. The

story told by the children last Thursday evening, that was a continuation of the story of the Jesus, this time in Thailand. The danger is not that in assimilating cultures, the story of Jesus may change. The story of Jesus will never change, because the Holy Spirit is the story-teller. The risk however is that in refusing to assimilate what is good in other cultures, the story of Jesus may not continue in other lands.

Christians are called to tell the story of Jesus, but in telling our story, we need to listen as well to the stories other people tell about themselves. Jesus did not insist on the story his own people tell about themselves. He listened to the story of the woman and allowed her own to become part of his. The Gospel has a word for this kind of listening, and it is called “compassion”. Compassion means “to feel with”. It means allowing another person to become part of our own story. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asked, “Who is neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of bandits?” The answer was, “the man who showed compassion towards him” (Lk. 10:36,37). And how did the Samaritan show compassion? By going out of his way to take care of the wounded man. By taking him to an inn and promising the innkeeper payment for whatever expense. Compassion means going out of your way to help someone in need. The priest who passed by, he didn’t want anyone to keep him from his duties. So he passed by on the other side of the road. The same with the Levite. Only the Samaritan was willing to bring the story of the man to become part of his own.

To continue the story of Jesus, we have to allow the story of others to become part of our own. It is not always a pleasant thing to invite someone into our world. We give alms to beggars so that we can send them away. It is easier to give than to listen to stories of other people. Listening to others can become inconvenient, because their stories might call for our involvement. We do not want to be involved in the lives of others, so we donate to faceless charities. We would rather make our money talk, than come face to face with someone who calls us to account.

Listening to others could also mean giving up the stories we have made for ourselves. For we may also project our own future and tell our stories even before they are fulfilled. The missionary who submits to the will of his superior even when it is contrary to his expectations, that too is a kind of listening which requires self-giving.

Blessed Mother Teresa, in one of her innumerable talks to various groups, impressed a non-Catholic, syncretist American woman so much she later on became a volunteer in the Los Angeles apostolate of the Missionaries of Charity. These were the words she heard from Mother Teresa on that day:

“I must tell you that all my young life, I was troubled by the suffering of the poor. But now that I am an old woman, I can share with you what I discovered to heal my own troubled heart. It is this: Meditate, for in silence you will find prayer, a humble voice in which to speak with God. With God, you will find a boundless love, and a desire borne of this love will lead you to serve the Almighty by serving God’s people. In this selfless giving to others, finally, you will find peace.”

Prayer leads us to discover God's boundless love. From this boundless love, a desire to serve his people blossoms, and it is in the selfless giving to others that finally, we shall find peace. It is also by the experience of our selfless giving that those whom we serve will hopefully find God --- the God who is compassionate, the God who listens, the God, who by being incarnate, allows our story to become part of His.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Star of the New Evangelization, be always our guide in sharing the story of Jesus with other cultures.