

CONFITEANTUR TIBI POPULI DEUS

A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday of the Year (A)

St Paul's Parish, Gävle, Sweden.

Texts: Isaiah 56: 1.6-7; Ps 66 (67); Rom. 11: 13-15. 29-32; Matt 15: 21-28

"Let all the peoples praise you, God". My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this line from the *Responsorial psalm* leads us to the theme of the message of today. We are declaring, by our song of praise, that all the peoples of the world should give to the Lord our God a worthy praise.

The First Reading from the Prophet Isaiah reveals the plan of Yahweh to bring all the peoples of the world to the obedience of the true faith and right, befitting worship. This was something new to the immediate audience of the prophet. Because, true worship of Yahweh could only be rendered by the chosen race – the people of Israel.

From last Sunday's Second Reading and that of today, we understand more about what I have just said. St Paul is demonstrating from the Scriptures and from the history of the chosen people that their disobedience was for a good purpose. It has made it possible for other races to become obedient to the will of the true God – the God of Israel. The faith of these other peoples expressed with clear conscience, their praises offered with pure hearts would be acceptable to God – the God of Israel – who is also the God of all the peoples of the world.

What this means is that there is a shift. There is a new interpretation and new understanding. Israel has been known as the people of God and God has been known as the God of Israel. If other races can now offer befitting worship and acceptable sacrifices to Yahweh, it means that these peoples ought to be called the people of God as well and God will also be their God in the same way he has been known as the God of Israel. But who can bring about this change? Only God himself! Only he can re-interpret the meaning of 'Israel' to include other races other than the physical descendants of Abraham.

And that is what God has done in Christ! For when the *true God from true God* became a human being he used his authority as the Son who is of *one being with the Father* to reinterpret the law and to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah that we have read today, as well as all other prophecies.

We will understand the Gospel reading better if we take our minds back to what happened when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. There were some men from the East – non-Israelites – who came to pay homage to the newborn King. These men represented all those who were not among the chosen race, but who, through the power of the God-made-man will be numbered among the members of the New Israel. Indeed the Catechism of the Catholic Church says it clearly:

*The Magi's coming to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be king of the nations. Their coming means that the pagans can discover Jesus and worship him as Son of God and Saviour of the world only by turning toward the Jews and receiving from them the messianic promise as contained in the Old Testament. The Epiphany shows that the "full number of the nations" now takes its "place in the family of the patriarchs," and acquires "**Israelitica dignitas**" (are made "worthy of the heritage of Israel"). (CCC 528).*

Now we can understand the drama presented to us in the Gospel of today. The poor lady who is following Jesus and disciples asks insistently for a favour, which only Jesus as Son of God can grant. But Jesus first ignores her and when the disciples insist that he grants the woman her wish in order to end the embarrassment of following them and shouting, he addresses the woman, as one would expect a Jew to speak to a non-Jew. But the woman is undeterred. She acknowledges that she is not worthy of the *dignity of the Israelites* but begs the Lord to have mercy on her. She is a woman of great faith – she has great faith in the Son of God who grants all humanity that dignity! The Lord confirms that, too: “Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted”. After this sermon, we shall profess our faith. This is the faith we professed for the first time when we were baptised. Through that baptism we became members of the *New People of God*, whom Christ has created in himself through his birth as man, his death and resurrection. Through that baptism, we were given new dignity – the dignity of sons and daughters of God – co-heirs with Christ to the heavenly inheritance. St Peter understood this and he admonishes us all never to dishonour the dignity we have as Christians. This is what he tells us: “***But you are a chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, a people to be a personal possession to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were a non-people and now you are the People of God; once you were outside his pity; now you have received pity***” (1 Peter 2: 9-10).

So, dearest brothers and sisters in Christ, while we sing to God, let us be aware of our nobility – let us be aware of our dignity as Christians and let us always sing praises by the kind of life we live - a life that is light in the midst of the darkness of unbelief and hopelessness.

*Let the peoples praise you O God,
Let all the peoples praise you!*

*Damian O. Eze, MSP
Gävle, Sweden, 17 August, 2008.*