

Homily 6th Sunday in Eastertide

Belonging to a Missionary Congregation I've always had a passion for missionary discipleship and the preaching of The Good News to all nations, Nations, such as Sierra Leone in West Africa where I spent time as a missionary, would be considered Gentiles by our more conservative Jewish brothers and sisters and therefore excluded from God's salvific plan. Yet as far back as The Old Testament many Gentiles were considered righteous, God-fearing and were held up as role models.

Naaman the leper, the Syrian. Melchisedek the high priest. Noah is the prototypical righteous Gentile. Whether Job another Gentile is originally as righteous as he seems or whether he even existed except as a parable are subjects of dispute, but he might qualify as well. There are several others in the Hebrew Bible as well; Eli'ezer, Abraham's servant and student, is definitely an example of a top-flight Gentile. The forefathers and foremothers of the Jewish People (beginning with Abraham, Sarah, etc.) are proto-Israelites and arguably were Gentiles before Abraham's Call. There are also Gentiles who later convert and join Israel, people such as Pharaoh's daughter Bithyah, Jethro, Zipporah, Rahab, Ruth and Na'amah, Solomon's wife, or those who join the covenanted family of Abraham before the Exodus, such as the righteous Tamar.

Jesus, in The New Testament, uncompromisingly goes out to Gentiles with his salvific mission. He goes to The Samaritan Woman at 'the well' who in turn becomes the first missionary disciple when she shares The Good News with her townsfolk (even although Jesus does say he came 'first for the lost sheep of Israel'.) Jesus cured the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman. He heals the Roman Centurian's servant. In the parable of 'The Good Samaritan', Jesus describes how a Gentile actively 'loves his neighbour' unlike the Jewish priest and Levite who ignore the person in need. He commands his disciples to '...go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News and forgive sins' on the evening of the day of The Resurrection in St John's Gospel. In Matthew Jesus likewise says, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...' In Mark 16:15 Jesus commands the disciples, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.' Despite no specific mention of going to The Gentiles in Luke the evangelist was a Gentile himself from Antioch and his Gospel is full of examples of Jesus' mission to The Nations.

In today's First Reading from Acts, The Early Church's first Gentile Convert Cornelius and his whole household receive The Holy Spirit. This is a clear indication that God's Plan of Salvation, whilst first to The Jews, his First Born, extended even from Old Testament times to all the peoples of the earth. The question remains, 'Will God deny salvation to those who have yet to receive or those who are yet to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour?' The question seems to be answered in today's Second Reading from 1John, 'My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.' Again, in The Gospel John writes, 'Jesus said to his disciples. 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.....This is my commandment: love one another, as I have loved you. A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.'

So, it is arguable that, those who have not heard the Good News or who have yet to accept Jesus also have the gratuitous gift of salvation and through their acts of love in service of their neighbour can respond to God's call. Love is the bottom-line sisters and brothers and the common yardstick against which all will be held accountable. Not labels, not titles, not clothing which separates us, but Jesus will ask us the simple question, 'Did you LOVE?' 'Whatever you did to the least of my sisters and brothers you did to me.'