

Pagan Faith

Intro. The word, “pagan” has a long history of meaning anyone who doesn’t believe like we do. Catholics thought Protestants were pagans and Protestants thought Catholics were pagans because of our different beliefs and practices. *Our* prayers were in a foreign language (Latin). *They* didn’t have communion every week (maybe once every three months). After we started breaking down a few walls between us, we discovered we were relatives after all. The disciples were about to learn the same lesson.

I. Pagans in the Lord’s time had faith, just in *many* different gods, not one God. Canaanites were a tribe of people already living in the Promised Land when the Israelites arrived after years in the desert. The Lord was traveling near Tyre and Sidon, the area where the Canaanite people lived. Today it is in Lebanon, north of Israel. It was there, almost in

pagan territory that the woman found the Lord. The disciples wanted to ignore her because she wasn’t of their tribe. Some things stand out about her. She called out, was respectful; a Gentile woman talking to a Jewish man keeping the social distancing. (We thought we made that up.) She addressed Jesus as “Lord, Son of David,” a title used in the Old Testament. She had done some homework. She did him homage, knelt down in front of him and asked for help. It was not an insulting conversation; the images used were easily understood by the Lord and the woman. The Lord told her his mission was to the Israelites and she answered with imagination and humor that house pets get scraps from the table. That must have made the Lord laugh with her. Knowing what we do about the Lord, aside from arguments with a few obnoxious Pharisees and scribes, we don’t believe he would be disrespectful to anyone not even the pagan woman in today’s

gospel. She came truly in “good faith” as a mother, to ask for her daughter to be healed. Her gods did not answer her prayers, so she went in search of someone who might. Even though the Lord’s primary mission was to the Israelites he didn’t always find faith in them like he found in this woman. His response was “Your faith has saved you,” and healing followed.

Concl. Often it is easy to see others as different from us because they come from a different culture, with different customs and a different language.

Our response can be that the gifts we have are only for ourselves and not to be shared so we “dismiss” others. Matthew wrote at a time when there was a great deal of tension between the “Jews and Gentiles and God’s plan of salvation” for them [*Sacra Pagina*, Matthew, D.J. Harrington, S.J., p. 236].

This conversation between the Lord and the Gentile woman serves to show “that Gentiles and Jews *could*

exist together in the same Christian community” [*Ibid*, p. 238]. It can be easy for us to dismiss people who bother us because of their different faith or viewpoint or skin color or accent. In this parish are people from the northeast, midwest, west and south of this country. We may joke about our accents, but we don’t usually dismiss each other. Usually. Faith is our unifying value. Maybe we can learn to live together and overcome all the small stuff, realizing we are related to one another through our faith in God.

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