

“Would you baptize an Extra-terrestrial?”

The question comes from Jesuit astronomer Guy Consolmagno, and I raise it, not just to get your attention, but to invite you deeper into the vexing issues that swirl around today’s scripture readings, and what wisdom scripture offer for dealing with the other aliens.

They all ask how, or even whether, we are to deal with aliens and strangers; and for ancient Israelites, non-Jews really were from some other planet, some place outside of God’s grace.

Israelites asserted that they were the Chosen People, to remind themselves to keep apart from pagans, lest they forget God and the Covenant. And keeping that Covenant was God’s most constant command.

Yet when Israel is at its most desperate, exiled to pagan Babylon, the prophet Isaiah, in the first reading, announces God’s unimaginable promise: Gentiles will be brought to the holy mountain, to minister to the Lord. The temple of Jerusalem, then lying in ruins, will become a house of prayer for all people.

Israel did not welcome that prophetic promise. When they rebuilt the temple, they erected walls with twelve slabs that warned, Death to any Gentile who enters the courts of Israel.

Yet St. Paul says that in Christ, God has now broken down those walls and joined the Gentiles, the pagans, to Christ, in order to stir the Jews to faith.

For God has shown mercy now to all, Gentiles and Jews alike.

And in the Gospel, by crediting this pagan woman with faith, Jesus demonstrates that no one is barred from God's mercy simply because of their race.

So, all three readings touch upon the first great theological problem of the early Church: whether God had now erased the old borders separating Jews from Gentiles.

Specifically, could Gentiles be baptized and admitted to Christian fellowship? Or did these “aliens” have to become Jews first and follow the dietary laws and submit to circumcision?

You might object, We know how that story turns out. We Gentiles got in. What's the gospel have to say to us?

Well, how does our society deal with aliens? Does the Church's long meditation on the issue offer any insights for today?

Consider again the story. This woman is a Canaanite; Canaanites were the worst enemies of Jewish religious purity. Whenever Israel was tempted to abandon the Covenant, it was the Canaanite gods who did the seducing.

When Canaanites wanted rain and fertile soil and abundant crops, they didn't just pray to Baal and Anath; the gods, you know, can be stubborn or stupid.

Instead, the Canaanites had to show the gods exactly what they wanted the gods to do. Baal, the sky god, of rain and thunder, had to inseminate Anath, the earth goddess, so she might bring forth good harvests. So Canaanite men went to their temples and engaged in imitative magic, ritual intercourse with temple prostitutes.

As you might imagine, some Israelite lads found this a tad more interesting than fasting and praying the Shema three times a day!

This of course earned the scorn and wrath of the prophets.

So, when Matthew says Jesus talked to this woman, you can imagine the disgust this caused among his disciples. “Send her away so we won’t have to endure her presence any longer.”

But Jesus confronts, not just the real problem, but the real person.

Jesus says that his mission is to the children of the Covenant. So, he puts the problem squarely back on the shoulders of the woman. What claim can she, as a pagan, make on Him?

Indeed, she is not a child of the Promise. She does not live by the Law. She is not one of the lost sheep whom Jesus has been sent to find.

What claim can she make on Him?

Astoundingly, she accepts Jesus as Messiah; she calls him “Son of David” and “Lord.”

But that’s not what finally counts with Jesus. What counts is this woman’s love for her child.

Out of love for her possessed daughter, this Canaanite woman throws over all her own religious traditions and accepts Jewish claims that they are superior to Canaanites.

She acknowledges that Jews are masters and Canaanites are dogs; well, actually she uses the word, puppies.

She even accepts Jesus as Messiah. In short, the woman refuses no humiliation and shrinks from no self-abasement if only Jesus will set her daughter free.

And that willingness to sacrifice all, to trust in God's goodness, that love---Jesus counts those as faith, that is, as faithfulness to what God demands of all people.

And that sacrificial love for her child constitutes a claim on Jesus which he never refuses.

Now, this woman could not pass a catechism quiz; she couldn't recite a creed; she didn't understand all those truths about the Trinity and the two natures of Jesus, and sacraments and all the rest. She wasn't even "born again."

But none of that comprised faith for Jesus. Rather, he looked upon her deed of love, her willingness to debase herself, for the sake of her daughter; and in that Jesus saw one who was doing the will of the Father.

And that's what this has to do with us. The Lord looks upon us in the same way.

Some here may find faith difficult.

Some consider themselves not very religious or pious.

Often, we have more questions and doubts than certainties.

We struggle with prayer or scripture or Church teachings.

Many here know lots of temptations, and too often feel the absence of God, and sadly conclude that our faith is weak and small.

But the example of this woman suggests that Jesus measures faith in a different way.

He looks upon the quality of our faithfulness to our children or our spouses or our commitments.

He sees the quality of our love, and our willingness to set aside our own needs for the sake of the needs of another.

He sees what we are willing to endure, and how much suffering we are willing to absorb, so that someone else might be set from the grip of evil and injustice and pain.

And all that Jesus counts as faith, faithfulness. And by that measure, many here who think themselves weak, God sees as people of great faith. And God has great faith in you.

We Gentiles are gathered here today, because the Lord, in His mercy, has pronounced us His own.

Jesus the Christ, whose existence is literally both extra-terrestrial and fully human, is not ashamed to sit at table with us, and indeed to share His very Body and Blood as our own food and drink.

He has broken down the walls between God and humanity erected by sin and made shalom peace by the blood of His Cross.

He has made us His temple, His dwelling place, and made our gathering a House of Prayer.

And He offers His love for us as a new gift, so we can ourselves become more a people of love, of faithfulness, to our families and friends, to strangers in our midst, and to all in need, especially those in the stranglehold of evil.

We pray for the vision to recognize in our simple acts of goodness and fidelity and love which we overlook, see them in fact as expressions of faith, our faith in each other and in God, and expressions of God's abiding faithfulness to us.

And with that vision, we pray to recognize that the aliens and strangers among us remind us of the gift of mercy and welcome God has given us in Christ Jesus.

And the people of God said, Amen.

Oh, by the way, when he was asked, "Would you baptize an Extra-terrestrial?" Jesuit astronomer Brother Guy answered, Only if they ask!