

20th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (August 14, 2011)
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We know and believe that Sacred Scripture is central to our faith as a fundamental source of our knowledge of God and of his plan for our salvation through Jesus his Son. But sometimes the scriptures we hear or read can be mystifying if not downright troubling. Our gospel today might be a good example of this. We are so familiar with Jesus and his compassion for those in need who approach him in faith for help. And yet in this passage from Matthew speaking of the (non-Jewish) Canaanite woman who asks for healing for her daughter, Jesus comes off appearing rather cold and uncaring if not in fact downright insulting. He first ignores her, then says he came only for Israel, and then what sounds even worse, he says it is not right to take the food of the children (i.e. the Jews) and throw it to the dogs (i.e. non-Jews). If we were in that woman's place, we might have felt crushed or even angry at such a response. But she is not deterred and has a brilliant comeback: "even the dogs eat the leftovers from the master's table." Jesus then praises her persistent faith and in fact heals her daughter.

So the story has a happy ending, but it can still leave us feeling a little unsettled. How could Jesus treat her so unkindly, even if only at first? It seems to contradict everything else we have ever known or heard about our Savior. Various saints and spiritual writers have said that Jesus' harshness was only on the surface; he wanted her to persist in her pleading so as to strengthen her faith—what we might call a first-century version of 'tough love'. Certainly there is validity to that approach, but still....

The Bible contains many other passages that can leave us perplexed: think, e.g., of the scene in Genesis where God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. Or consider other aspects of our Catholic faith and the spiritual life—we may know the Catechism answers to questions of doctrine or the struggles and crises we face in life, but our understanding and comprehension of them is far from complete. And so we have to confront a fundamental question here: **can we live with mystery**—i.e. with the fact that we mere humans cannot have total comprehension of divine and spiritual realities? That is not simply an abstract, irrelevant question...because how we grapple with and answer that question will make a huge difference in how we approach the basic questions of life, what we are here for, and where we are going.

Think about some of the fundamental mysteries of our faith. For example, we believe that God is Trinity—one and only one God, but three Persons within that divine oneness. We also believe in the Incarnation: that God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, became one of us in the womb of Mary, that he died on the Cross and rose from the dead. We believe completely and wholeheartedly in these truths, but anyone claiming to understand fully these dogmas would not be telling the truth. In fact, it is precisely because of such doctrines that countless people throughout history have not accepted the Christian faith. Back in Jesus' time, many of the scribes and Pharisees—those sharing Jesus' own Jewish faith—were totally scandalized by the things Jesus said and did: daring to pronounce forgiveness for notorious sinners, doing good works on the Sabbath, and claiming God as his Father. Because they could not and would not understand, they rejected Jesus. Even the apostles at times had their struggles with understanding Jesus; they were slow to grasp the mystery he was and that he came to reveal. Remember how Jesus in John 6 told them about eating his flesh and drinking his blood (John's account of the Eucharist)—many of them left Jesus because they could not handle it; they did not understand, and so they wanted no further part of him. It wasn't until Pentecost and the apostles receiving the Holy Spirit that their faith understanding began to grow in earnest.

In our own time, it is often the world of science and technology that presents major challenges to our Catholic faith and Christianity in general. No one questions the major advances in human knowledge that have come through our scientific inquiries, and the Church honors those advances as ways to help us know more of the splendor and the intricacy of God's creation. But some scientists have taken a more extreme approach and say that we should not accept as true anything that cannot be proven empirically or

in a laboratory—thus rejecting the entire Christian faith and all other religions. Richard Dawkins, an atheist-scientist in our own time, has written “The God Delusion”—he is hardly subtle in his rejection of God and faith because he cannot verify them and prove them according to his own demands and standards.

Can we live with mystery? Do we have the humility and the honesty to realize that we do not and cannot know it all? We certainly know a great deal about ourselves and our world, and we are learning more and more all the time...and well we should. After all, God gave us our brains and our thinking and learning skills, and he calls on us to use them so we can grow in wisdom and understanding. But therein lies the temptation as well: to conclude that our human awareness and knowledge is the bottom-line standard by which we judge everything else, especially those things that transcend strictly human awareness and understanding. That is where the Richard Dawkins and others of this world run into problems—claiming to be the ultimate arbiter of the claims of God and faith. Just this past week I came across an interesting and rather absurd example of this mentality—a polling agency asked people for their opinion about God and how well he is doing in his job as God. Now, just think about that for a moment.... Such polls are often taken about those in public office, but this is the first one I’ve ever known to take such questions to the divine level. You will be glad to know that 52% of the respondents approved of God’s performance on things like the creation of the universe! Is it not a tad unseemly to be asking mere mortals what we think about God’s performance? That is more than a little bit of chutzpah. The last line of the commentary on this poll: “No word from the pollsters on what God thinks of us.” That does seem to be the more relevant question, doesn’t it??

Can we live with mystery? Especially when we face great personal struggles and crises? The Canaanite woman did get an answer to her prayer, even though it was a bit delayed. But sometimes we plead to God for help in dealing with an illness or death or broken marriage or family relationship or other difficulty...and we seem to get no answer at all. And here is where the mystery of the Incarnation takes on special power and relevance, because Jesus, the Son of God, experienced those very same questions. In the Garden of Gethsemani he prayed to be delivered from the suffering he knew was coming, but he had to endure it anyway. On the cross he cried out “My God, why have you forsaken me?”...but he got no answer that he could perceive. Even Jesus Christ himself grappled with the deepest and most painful aspects of the mystery of life, suffering and death; in his human nature, he did not have all the answers.

Can we live with mystery? Sure you can—you do it every day. Think about this on the level of human relationships: do you totally understand, do you fully comprehend everything about your spouse? Your children? Your parents? Yourself?? Everything they say and do, and how they respond (or don’t respond) to you? If you say ‘yes’, I’m tempted to remind you of when confession times are... Of course you don’t. You love them, but you can also be totally and frustratingly at a loss to understand them. And when we look in the mirror, we so often ponder: “what in the world was I thinking when I said that or did that?” Likewise in our relationship with God. The foundation of our faith is rock solid—the revealed word of God and the historical reality of Jesus and the solid evidence of his death and resurrection. But God never promised that we would have total understanding of his ways or of the life of faith; in fact, he said just the opposite. Remember the Lord’s words coming to us through Isaiah: “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts” (Is. 55:9). God and our faith in him does not contradict reason, but they do indeed surpass reason’s ability to provide total knowledge.

We can and we should live with mystery because God makes it possible for us in and through his Son. Allow yourself to embrace the mystery of God, to be embraced by and immersed in that divine mystery. You may not be able to understand all the details of divine truth, but you will know a peace and a joy beyond human understanding...all because of the word that God has revealed to us, the Word that became

flesh and dwelled among us.