

Faith ultimately means swallowing the whole enchilada

It must have been disconcerting to an early Christian – in the immediate years after Pentecost – to find some Egyptian or Syrian shoving him deeper into his pew to gain space for this alien's odd looking family to have a seat. (I'm not saying that churches back then looked like ours – but just for the sake of an example.)

For you see the earliest Christians were Jews. They didn't cease to be ethnically proud of their patriarchs and prophets and history and Temple. But within a few years of early Church preaching by the apostles and deacons like Philip and especially that "fanatic" Saint Paul, non-Jews were increasing in number, sharing in the sacraments . . . whereas in the old days (to bring the experience up to date) all the news broadcasts were delivered by white males, now people of different physiognomy and color and gender and even speech were taking over.

Indeed a division developed within the early Church between those Christians who wanted the Church to remain Jewish (well within the familiar traditions of the Old Testament) and Gentile Christians (Greek, Roman, African, Lebanese) growing in number, who valued the freedom, the grace, the wider horizons offered to them by the Gospel. By 80 AD, the date of Matthew's Gospel, such diversity was leading to a schism, the clear separation of Synagogue and Church which lasts to this day.

Given that crisis people began to read today's Gospel passage in the light of "what to do" about this now unstoppable influx of Gentiles into a tradition so rooted in the history and images of Israel. And so we have a scene in which Jesus himself is portrayed as staying in Gentile territory amid Canaanites – just as Christians by that date were living among Gentiles throughout the Mediterranean region. And these Gentiles want to sit at table with these Christians, experience the power of Christ. But some early (Jewish) Christians say, "No. They are unclean." and the now Gentile majority says, "Yes, the Gospel is universal in its range." What would Jesus do?

Well he does what he did. He behaves with profound respect for his Jewish heritage of which his Gospel is the blossoming. You don't benefit from the Gospel if you don't embrace the whole drama of the Old Testament that gave birth to it. Nobody can just walk in and have the cookies and walk out. Jesus wants a commitment to the whole story, which is not something you can take or leave, toss away the wrappings and walk off with the taco. But in effect Jesus says, "This woman may not recognize the whole rich tradition out of which the Gospel comes; but she knows enough to want to know." And ultimately she had a faith, a trust capable of educating Jesus to that wider world about which he himself was preaching. To which he could only say: "O woman! Great is your faith!"

Which reminds me of old Father Aloysius Craven at Graymoor long ago. Pilgrims came up the Hudson on weekends to spend a day among our chapels and statues and – gift shop. There arrived a time when more and more of the pilgrims were Baptists from Harlem, who inevitably gathered in great numbers for the outdoor Mass. Aloysius panicked every Sunday! In his Irish brogue he would say, "I repeat! Only Catholics are allowed to come to communion." The Baptist participants nodded they understood. But every time, as communion was distributed, up they came smiling, while Aloysius felt another year of his life slide prematurely away.