

A Lesson in Prayer

From the Gospel: St. Matthew xv. 21 ff.

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 128

21 Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. **22** And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. **23** But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. **24** But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. **25** Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. **26** But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. **27** And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. **28** Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.

I want to go deeper than the circumstances of this wonderful and perplexing Gospel story to explore a topic which may at first glance appear unrelated to the account: that of *prayer*.

There are certainly other riches that can be mined from our text. It is, for instance, one of the few Gospel accounts that involves our Lord with non-Jews, in this case, a *woman of Canaan*. The uniqueness of the encounter is furthered by the mere fact of her being both a woman and a Gentile. In another text in St. John 4 Jesus does indeed also dialogue with a woman, to the amazement of His disciples, but as a Samaritan, she is, at least, a “half Jew”. In another story, Jesus responds to the faith of a Roman centurion regarding a beloved servant who was very ill. Jesus heals the servant, and praises the centurion’s faith in a very singular manner:

...he marvelled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. (Lk. 7:9).

But in today’s account, the gulf that separates this non-Jewish woman from the Lord is a wide one indeed, and she does everything she can to bridge it. I used the word “perplexing” to describe this story, because of the apparently unaccountable manner in which Jesus reacts to her desperate efforts to procure His help. But all of this will afford us some excellent instruction in prayer as well as insights into the dynamics of properly relating to our Lord.

We live in a culture that tends to trivialize propriety, both in human interaction, but certainly also in our contact with the divine. There are several sources for this incredible casualness, whether it be that independent spirit which in part is a fruit of Protestantism, or that peculiarly American fear of anything that might compete with the principle of democracy, or, most recently, that unwritten canon of correct behavior that absolutely forbids showing deference where tradition has always expected it. Slovenliness is the consequence, and it affects worship, as well. It diminishes all respectful distance from God, and creates the immensely false impression that He can be approached on any terms we name.

All of this is incredibly dangerous. I am reminded of the Eastern Orthodox icons of “Christ Pantocrator”, the Almighty One, seated upon His throne in glory, judging the world, and

drawing all human history to a close. This is the image of our Lord that we are inclined to forget as we behold Him in the humble trappings of His human flesh. There is a dismal saying that “familiarity breeds contempt” which certainly too often proves true on the human level, but can never, ever be allowed in our dealings with our God. Although He condescended to walk among us in all humility, even to submitting to the very worst we could offer Him, His majesty and splendor, hidden though they were, were never even slightly diminished.

But let’s return to our Gospel story. A poor woman with a terrible need approaches Jesus, having heard of His miraculous powers. Her anxiety has driven her to set aside a whole range of reservations in running to this Jewish Messiah for assistance. Her confidence in His abilities knows no bounds. *But he answered her not a word.* “How can the One full of love and compassion possibly have done this?” we ask. We can only imagine her shock and dismay at what would appear to be His absolute aloofness. Nothing can be worse than silence from those from whom we seek grace and mercy.

But here is where the dynamics of real, powerful, effective prayer begin to be unfolded to us (and allow me to ask you: are you interested in any other kind of prayer than this?). The face of God may often appear to us to be absolutely impassive, even cold and inscrutable, in the face of our extremities. Our pain is great, the issues we face are pressuring us. We pray, but there is no answer.

Please let me hasten to say that there are lessons for us that we may only learn when hindsight has removed us safely from the circumstance and allowed us enough objective space so that we can really see what happened. It wasn’t that God didn’t hear us. It wasn’t that He didn’t intend to answer. But His goal for us was first to honor Him, to trust and reverence Him, of far greater import than even receiving the answers we were desperately in need of. We are learning that there is a progression in prayer.

Not only does the Lord refuse to answer her as she weeps and cries for help, but the disciples, His closest followers, try to hound her out of the area: *Send her away ; for she crieth after us.* Watching the manner in which Jesus ignored her, they took their cues, and offered assistance. But they had something to learn, as well: *But he answered and said , I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* She may have wondered, “Why does He delay? Of what use is such a discussion in the face of my need?”

Jesus has just laid out what would appear to be absolutely impossible terms to her. If she takes His words as final, then there is no point for her to continue. She has no grounds for argument. She could only turn and depart, facing the awful tragedy of the loss of her daughter to demon-possession. He seems to summarily dismiss her: “application denied”.

But she persists, in spite of the absolute declaration of refusal that has just been uttered by the only One fully authorized to say yes or no. “I *cannot* help you,” He is all but saying. *Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me.* She literally threw herself on the ground before Him. She ignored His dismissal. She was determined to constitute an exception to a biblical law that might as well have been considered immutable. She refused to allow the entire weight of the Old Testament Mosaic covenant with the Jews as God’s unique, chosen people to prevent her from penetrating through the virtually insurmountable barrier it represented, to get to her desired goal.

Do I even possess a small measure of such faith? If God were to present to me the real ineligibility I possess before Him as a sinner as the reason He could never deal with me on any level, what would I do? He would be right, and I would have nothing to say in return.

Now, incredibly, He seems to add insult to injury: *But he answered and said, It is not meet [proper, becoming] to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs [lit. “little dogs”].* Now at this point the two principal figures of this story are very near one another. One can imagine the amazement and perhaps even revulsion of His disciples as they stood around observing all of this. Some of you have “little dogs” who lick up crumbs on the floor under your kitchen tables. Our “big dog” moved legs and furniture in the process! But here is our Lord, presiding at the head of the table of miracles. None other could take that seat. And here is this dear woman, close enough to brush up against His legs, as it were, and willing to do so, if only she might be allowed a few crumbs of His supernatural powers. There is something extraordinary in the fact that He has been willing to carry on the dialogue to this extent. He has created for her an extraordinary series of “hoops”, and thus far, she has successfully jumped through every one.

And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. She affirms His position. She acknowledges that her own, by the standards Christ has imposed, is impossible. But she is possessed of a superhuman courage and confidence, considering the circumstance, that none of us would dare to boast. The result is that she prevails. She triumphs over the great mountain of the Law. She wins, as it were, her argument with the Lord. But most of all, of greater importance than any of that to the heart of this dear mother, is that she gets her miracle: *Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.*

How can we not admire her? She beheld God as indifferent, perhaps even hostile, to her interests. But her faith gave her strength to look beyond what appeared to be obvious, to a God whom she somehow knew to be merciful and kind. Without any basis for hope nor upon which she could make a claim for assistance whatsoever, she succeeded.

The terms of our relationship with God, as believers, differ from hers. We have a great and wonderful array of promises that He has offered to us in the realm of prayer. They are free for us to use, any time, with any need. But we cannot fail to learn from this woman's example of faith. Perhaps our Lord was teaching her the appropriate reverence which as I noted above is lacking in so many quarters today. We are never to take for granted the attributes of God upon which we are so dependent. And He will certainly not long brook impertinence from anyone, including His own children.

Words from our own service of Holy Communion, derived from today's text, come back to us:

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy... (Book of Common Prayer, p. 82).

As we continue through Lent, let us reassess our attitude toward the Lord. Do we take exception to the spirit of the age, by honoring Him in the manner in which we speak and live, and even within the very private regions of our own heart, when we approach Him with our needs in prayer? Will we persevere, when, in the midst of our turmoil, the ways of God seem so incomprehensible?

We have at least each other to lean upon in these struggles. But she had no one.

But most pioneers are indeed alone.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.