

A Woman's Faith

The Second Sunday in Lent)

(From the Gospel: St. Matthew xv. 21.)

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.

Parallel account in St. Mark 7: **24** From there He arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden. **25** For a woman whose young daughter had an unclean spirit heard about Him, and she came and fell at His feet. **26** The woman was a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth, and she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. **27** But Jesus said to her, "Let the children be filled first, for it is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." **28** And she answered and said to Him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs under the table eat from the children's crumbs." **29** Then He said to her, "For this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter." **30** And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and her daughter lying on the bed.

As a new Christian, many years back, I was puzzled by instances such as the one represented in today's Gospel: somehow, Jesus appears to be acting in ways that contradict His character. How can the Savior whom we know as meek, mild, and filled with love deal with a poor and needy woman in such a manner? He seems unkind, or even cruel. But as with many biblical texts, we must probe deeper than the obvious in order to understand the logic and purpose of Christ in these accounts. The Holy Spirit has brought them to us just as they are, and they have much to offer us.

It is always helpful to examine a given passage within its context. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus had been involved in a fierce argument with Pharisees and teachers of the Law from Jerusalem, whom He had denounced as hypocrites. He leaves their company together with His disciples, and travels some distance away. Perhaps He is seeking respite from the constant controversy of His ministry among the Jews, and is looking for an occasion to teach the Twelve privately.

How difficult has His mission to His own people been!: *He came unto His own, and His own received Him not* (John 1:11). His appearance in Israel is the culmination of all of Jewish sacred history. The nation, with its special, favored status before God, demonstrated to them in countless ways, was granted the highest blessing of providing the context for the appearance of His only Son. Through Him, the eternal order of God's Kingdom would be manifest. But instead,

He was refused by them. Israel sought to dictate to God the terms of His dealings with men. Their sin in rejecting Christ proved their underlying need, one common to all men: before we can have a King, we must have a Redeemer, one who will free us from sin. We cannot be ruled until we are made rutable. To such a fact the Jews of Jesus' days were blinded.

But in our text, Jesus makes an amazing discovery, in the most unlikely of settings. A Gentile woman reveals faith that stunningly surpasses anything we might expect of her. Her example propels her way out front among the numerous people who encountered Christ, who could have --who *should* have-- demonstrated the same excellence of spirit she possessed. The circumstances against her are numerous. She is a non-Jew, and not even a half-Jew, as was the woman whom Jesus met at the well in Samaria. She is, of course, a *woman*, and certainly had no notions of equality for women or women's rights in the same way that we understand these things today. She would have approached a Jewish man, and especially a renowned one, with great fear and trepidation. Further, she must act fast: her daughter is in a grievous state, and Christ is merely visiting an area at the border of Israel near her home. She would have to have travelled to find Him, and she must prevail upon Him immediately, while she has opportunity.

Now lets examine Christ's dealing with her. She *cried unto him* with the need of her daughter. She is distraught. Her *daughter is grievously vexed with a devil*. But Jesus is impassive: *he answered her not a word*. In order to understand what would appear to be heartlessness on His part, we must "imagine ourselves into" this scene. Think of the paradox: He appears to have wasted words of love and forgiveness to the hardhearted Jews who want nothing of Him, but He says not a word to a non-Jew who desperately needs Him! This is a mystery, until we understand how great the divide had been that separated those to whom God had committed Himself by an unbreakable covenant spoken centuries ago to Abraham, father of the Jews, and reaffirmed through Moses and the prophets, from those who were outside it. But a critical turning point in sacred history is about to be reached: the rejection of the Gospel by the preponderance of Israel will mean salvation for the Gentiles, as well. All the world, one might say, draws in its breath in expectation of what is about to take place. This welcoming into the covenant of *all* peoples everywhere, through faith in Christ, is history's most momentous occasion to date. Perhaps the Lord's silence to the woman is because of the holiness and importance of what her coming to Him signifies. But surely He is testing her faith as well, and, through her, the faith of all non-Jews who will follow her. Will they love Him, pursue Him, desire Him, and stop at nothing to reach Him, as she did? Will they honor Him as His own covenanted people had refused to do?

She presses on in spite of His apparent aloofness, and is met with what sounds like a curt dismissal: *I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. One can almost hear the painful sadness in His voice when He utters these words. What had the "lost sheep" met Him

with, but hatred and contempt? His reply to her seems almost like a theological statement of a very high order, not the brushoff we might expect to a woman probably without any education. As we will see, she demonstrates herself as anything but ignorant.

She will not be deterred: *Then came she and worshipped him, saying , Lord, help me.* She prostrated herself before Him in reverence. She freely offers Him what all men should offer. Her expectations of Him are the highest. Her confidence in Him, amazingly, is complete. But He continues, it seems, to fill her path with roadblocks: *He answered and said , It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.* First he ignores her, then he attempts to dismiss her, and now he insults her! But she is a champion, and will clear every hurdle!

Again, His statements, and her replies, are on a complex, theological level. The *children's bread* is the miracle-working power of Christ, isn't it? Yes, that, but it is also more: it is Christ Himself. Elsewhere in Scripture He presented Himself to His fiercely antagonistic Jewish detractors as *bread*: *And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger ; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst* (John 6:35). Jesus seems to be saying to her, "Shall the Messiah, and all that He possesses, that One who is the King of Israel, His own nation, to whom He was sent, shall He be shared without reservation with those with whom no relationship whatsoever has been established?" To call her a "dog" seems utterly demeaning, but the word *dogs* here is better translated "little dogs" (think "lap-dogs"). Until this moment, the Gentile peoples had been absolutely excluded. As St. Paul put it to the Gentile Ephesian church:

...at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world... (Eph. 2:12)

Her humility and faith, however, are about to grant her, and all those countless many who will follow her with the same attitude, the equivalent status of full participation in the blessings of Christ that had been so easily and ungratefully spurned by His own brethren. *And she said , Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.* She is willing to account herself a little dog, if in doing so she can obtain what she needs. She would never have spoken with Christ in this manner unless she fully understood what He was driving at, which is what makes her so amazing. She is willing to account the Jews as *the children*, Christ as the *master*, and herself and other Gentiles as little *dogs*, as long as she can have the *crumb* she needs: the healing of her demon-possessed daughter. Her faith not only wins her a crumb, but a feast, a feast which the chosen guests had treated as contemptible. His reply: *O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt .* She receives both the very highest compliment the Lord might accord her, along with the miracle she desired.

There are other, very practical lessons we can draw from her example. Our prayers, and perhaps especially those on behalf of our loved ones, need to be desperate, and persistent. And

we must endure God's silences in response. The longed for answers we hope for may be a long time coming. And it is easy to interpret the lack of progress we see as being God's lack of interest in, or even dismissal of our petitions. This woman of Canaan refused to take an apparent "no" for an answer. She knew of the character and reputation of the One she addressed. She was convinced that He would honor her request, even when He Himself appeared to be discouraging her. Only great faith persists against such terrific odds. She at least got her wish after a few minutes of skillful dialogue with Christ. But some of us have been waiting much longer. We often struggle with jumping to conclusions about the Lord's attitude toward us, and easily misinterpret our circumstances, and assume the worst.

And her daughter was made whole from that very hour. Because this woman prevailed with Christ, her daughter was freed of demonic possession. And she set a precedent for all believing Gentiles. Her vision for complete acceptance by Christ would soon begin to be fully realized through the Church by the apostolic ministry and its successors, throughout the world.

How could she have known her place as a pioneer and forerunner when she sought the Lord so fervently on that day so long ago?

She was only a woman of Canaan... a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth...

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