

Homily on the Canaanite woman (Matthew 17)

Fr. Filip Lommaert **Sunday, January 29, 2023**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, one God.

Amen.

Whenever we read the Gospel we are always able to catch glimpses of Christ's great and good heart. The Lord reveals to us His Father's gracious will to heal and save all of creation by living among us an incarnate life and demonstrating what it is that the Holy Trinity desires.

Today's Gospel passage (Matthew 15:21-28) shows us to what extent a person will go to secure what he or she wants and needs from a beneficent, all-loving God.

Jesus is travelling through a distant land just before the epic of His passion and death. This is the only instance in the Gospels where he actually ventures outside the Jewish territory.

There in this distant land, He is approached by a Canaanite woman whose ethnic background is repulsive to faithful Jews. Furthermore, she humbly asks Jesus to deliver her daughter from demonic possession. The daughter is broken. The mother seems desperate.

The Apostles seem annoyed at the woman's insistence. The disciples, just doing what their upbringing taught them, reveal their impurity of heart by condemning the Canaanite Woman. The woman was not only acting improperly by approaching the Lord as she did, but she was also a Gentile so she was somebody to be avoided.

At first, Jesus was silent which probably pleased his disciples. They hoped for a rebuke from Jesus and they even ask for it by name saying, "Send her away".

And then Jesus made his famous reply, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”.

The disciples must have been overjoyed at hearing those words. At last, Jesus was standing up for his heritage. His next remark, I am sure, must have been music to their ears. “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”.

In saying this, Jesus sought to reveal two things: one tragic and one divine. He actually made an example of both the disciples and the woman; the disciples for their cruelty and lack of faith and the woman for her humility and spiritual beauty.

Her reply echoes forever as an example of pure love, “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master’s table”. Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.’”

You see, the only really important thing that matters is humility. It doesn’t matter who or what you are, or what you have done, humility opens the floodgates of divine grace.

And what does this say about us? What lesson can we learn from this? This Gospel points to the way of life that pleases God. And it is not the way of the disciples, dictated by fear, bigotry, and hatred. Those are indicators of sin, sure signs that self-interest is the motive.

The attitude of the disciples should not be surprising to us. Look at us now, nearly 2,000 years later.

Do we honestly think that anything has changed? No, to the contrary. Nothing has changed at all!

Fear, bigotry, hatred, and self-interest are everywhere. The world is ruled by them. Why? Because of the great lack of faith, humility, and love. Because people have abandoned God and turned to the devil for instant self-gratification and the cult of “I want it and I want it now”.

Look at what is happening in the Western so-called civilised world. It has never been more uncivilised. Every sign of Christianity and the Christian way of living is being eradicated. It is not that just individuals are turning their back on God, but governments, all over the world, are issuing policies that are detrimental to Christianity and the followers of Christ. That is why!

The way of the Canaanite woman pleases Jesus, Her way is that of extreme humility and love. In her, there is not one ounce of self-interest. Her ego has been destroyed. Because the great enemies of ego are faith and love.

She approaches the Lord without any regard for social convention. She begs him for help, and accepts his rebuke with a display of unprecedented faith. She calls herself a dog. Let us not forget that in the Middle East, to this day, dogs are still considered unclean by Muslims.

The Canaanite woman also calls Christ “Master”. This was an implicit act of faith on her part. It was an expression of agreement with His perceived power as healer and sovereign over nature.

One thing this passage does not tell us is whether the woman converted to Judaism. It simply reveals that the personal power emanating from Jesus Christ was enough to move her heart to submission.

What began as a conversation between strangers and sworn rivals, a conversation where she addressed Jesus as Son of David, ended in an exchange of tender hearts wherein she addressed Him as Lord.

So, how can we know we are on the right track? Quite easily. Through humility and love.

It is simple, “They will know we are Christians by our love”. But it must be humility and love in its most radical form that extends even to our enemies, to those who abuse us and wish us harm, which is no mean feat. This will probably be the most difficult thing we will ever do.

Elder Ephraim of Philotheou said: “May you love one another and not be embittered by reason of egotism. Humility is a sure guide; it does not allow the one who has it to strike against the reefs of carelessness and be crushed, but as a luminous guide it leads faultlessly to safety”.

And, Saint Raphael of Lesbos said: “A good Christian loves his fellow men, helps the poor, and is very humble”.

All that our Lord did and said was for love. His great and good heart was always open. It should really be obvious to all of us that everything we do must be for the love of God and our neighbour? Without humility of heart, we can not love.

We must first realise that our neighbour is “Christ with us”, and then, our actions will take on a holy character. We must do whatever is humanely possible to lift up others, to bring joy, peace and comfort to others, to humble ourselves before others as we would do before the Lord Himself. Anything other than that is born out of pride and self-interest, the two progenitors of everything evil.

This Gospel story confuses many of its readers because our Lord’s words seem so unusual. Nobody would have expected, before reading this passage, that our Lord Jesus Christ could be so harsh and offensive to a woman in need.

His words seem so contrary to the general spirit we see throughout His life. What message does this story hold for us?

Well, Jesus Christ is trying to teach an important lesson about authentic faith. Authentic faith is not simply believing in the existence of a supernatural power. Authentic faith is not simply believing in a god fashioned after our own desires and pleasures.

Authentic faith, from an Orthodox Christian perspective, is a faith in the one true God as revealed to us in history through Holy Scriptures. Authentic faith is believing in an all-loving, yet mysterious God.

Authentic faith is believing in an all-powerful God who accepts being humiliated and crucified. And such authentic faith comes from a deep spiritual life of sacrificial love, extreme humility, persistent struggle, and undying hope. So we must persist with our own multitude of prayerful requests. Some may be acute, others may be less important. That does not matter.

But we should never forget: God is never deaf. God does not ignore his children. God answers us in His wisdom and gives us what we need.

The important thing is that we should never give up or become discouraged.

Remember the parable of the Canaanite woman – her persistence brought her into intimate union with Jesus Christ our King and our God.

And, that intimacy awaits us as well. Never give up, and never become discouraged!

Amen!