

“The Faith of Israel”

Matthew 15: 21-28

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The message of today's Gospel is clear enough: if you want something, then pray for it. And if at first you don't get it, then try praying again. If God means for us to have something, then of course He will give it to us. But He might withhold whatever the thing is that we want — and that He intends for us to have — until we ask for it. He might even withhold it until we ask twice. Our Lord made the Gentile woman in the Gospel ask three times before granting her request. And, of course, if what we are asking for would not be good for us to have, then we must trust that God, in His infinite wisdom and goodness, will not grant it. That takes a different kind of faith, and it is the subject of a different sermon. Let us concentrate now on the case before us — of God's giving what one asks for in a petition, but only after much persistence.

When Jesus and His disciples were traveling the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, in Syrian territory, a woman who was not an Israelite, a woman of Canaan, sought Jesus out and came to Him crying — rather like one of those beggars we will meet, in the less savory parts of a city, who try to play on our sympathy. She came to Jesus with tears in her eyes — maybe they were forced tears — and implored Him, saying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.” — And so Jesus did what most of us would have done: He ignored her. — She continued her pleading with the disciples until they tired of her too, and asked their Master whether He would not send her away.

Then the poor wretch threw herself at Jesus' feet "and worshipped Him," the Gospel says. — "Sorry, but you're not a Jew," the Messiah answered her. — Well, no, He did not put it quite that way. What Our Lord in fact said was, "It is not right for me to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs."

But the Syrian woman knew better than to quarrel with Jesus. She did, after all, address Him as the Messiah, as the "Son of David." She accepted the label, as being but a dog when compared with the Chosen People, and so replied, in her clever but humble way: All right, Lord, whatever you say. "But even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

With that third time of asking, the woman's petition was granted. "O woman, great is your faith: be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

Now, what do we learn from that? And how do we explain Our kind Lord's severity in the test He put before this Gentile woman who came to Him seeking deliverance for her daughter? Our lectionary, as usual, sets us up for our Gospel reading with Scriptures from the OT. How does this story relate to the one the Bible tells overall? The reading from Isaiah [56: 1-8] makes the familiar prediction that there will come a day when persons from other nations will be included in the Covenant and the Kingdom. The time for the knowledge of the true God to go out to the Gentiles was Pentecost, after the Messiah had completed the mission of His first advent and returned to Heaven. So this exchange with the woman of Canaan, which resulted in the healing of her daughter, would appear to be a preliminary signal of what was soon to come. "Let all the peoples praise You, O God," we heard in the

chanted Psalm today. St Paul makes a comment in Romans 15 that the Gospel is the means for getting the Gentiles to fulfill that call. The story of Jesus, who is David's Heir, is, for all who will accept it, the means for bringing non-Jews such as we into the story that begins in Genesis 12 with the call of Abraham.

Those OT references shed light on what's going on in the encounter of Our Lord with the woman of Canaan while traveling on the coast, but I think we need to recall yet another OT story to get its full impact. Jacob, Abraham's grandson, wrestled all night with a man whom he later discovered to be the LORD — Yahweh. Because Jacob wrestled with God, and when he had pinned Him would not let Him go until He was given a blessing, Jacob received it. Furthermore, he was given a new name, Israel — Israel, which means, the text of Genesis tells us, "he who prevails with God." Israel, literally, is the one who prevails with God.

Now for a Jew to be worthy of the name "Israelite," he or she must have the faith of his or her ancestor, the man whom God renamed "Israel." And what kind of faith is that? It is the faith that allows one to wrestle with God until he or she prevails. — And that's what this woman of *Canaan* does in today's Gospel. The Gentile woman, the non-Jewess, wrestles with God in prayer until she prevails and her daughter is healed. Once she gets a hold on Jesus with her request, she will not withdraw it — she won't let go — until He answers her.

Our Lord puts her to the test, and a severe test it is. What does she prove in that test? That she is more worthy of the name "Israelite" than are Jesus' own disciples. She may have been a Canaanite according to the flesh, the heiress of centuries of idolatry, but spiritually she was a

circumcised descendent of Jacob. That's what St Paul says we are all to be, we who have been grafted into Israel by our faith in Israel's Messiah. We are to prove, by a faith that allows us to wrestle with God and prevail, that we are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. Then we can be a people of the Exodus, leave the house of bondage, and follow Our Saviour into the Promised Land. — The message of today's Gospel is loud and clear. We don't just read about the story of Israel. We *are* the story. God has made us so by our faith in Jesus, the Son of David.

So what is the practical lesson in all this? Practically speaking, this story about Our Lord's encounter with a Gentile woman teaches us how we ought to pray. Expect to be put to the test when you ask something of God. Expect to be put to the test, and expect to get through it with a little humility. "It is not right to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs." The Jewish Messiah, with that remark, has compared us all to dogs. I'm sorry, but if we want to have our petitions granted, we'll just have to take it. (I suppose it is easier, if like me, you're a dog-lover.)

But in that test of humility, there is the opportunity for faith — even for a heroic faith, if by grace we can muster it. We must be convinced, not only that Israel's Messiah will take pity on us, but also that what we are praying for is something that is good, good for our souls as well as our or someone else's material welfare. The Syrian woman knew that her daughter was plagued with a devil, and she knew that the devil was not good for her. She also believed, believed with all her heart, that, if she asked the One who had the power to cast out that devil, then the deed would be done. She believed that so much she would not quit asking until her request was

granted. She knew that God was good, and she knew that He was powerful. Hence, with a little nagging, she knew He would not let her down.

There is an old story, probably apocryphal, about something that occurred in a small Southern town. One of its citizens obtained a permit to build a tavern right across the street from the Baptist church. Construction began and the church prayed that somehow God would see to it that the work was never completed. Well, just about the time the building was completed and the owner went to the city for his occupancy permit, lightning struck and it burned to the ground. — After that, the church members were pretty smug -- that is, until the owner filed a suit, claiming that the congregation was responsible for the loss of his building. In their reply to the court, they said, "No, your honor, we had nothing to do with it." — When the judge took his first look at the case he said, I don't know how I'm going to decide this, but one thing is clear. We have a bar owner that believes in the power of prayer, and a church that doesn't.

Now back to the example we have in today's Gospel. Here we have a woman who certainly believed in the power of prayer, because she believed in the power of God manifested in His Son, Jesus Christ. And she believed in the rightness of her request — that she was asking for something that was good, that her daughter be released from bondage. How do our own petitions stand up against that one? When, at the beginning of our liturgy, we ask God to cleanse our hearts with His Spirit, do we really acknowledge that our hearts need cleansing? Do we in fact admit that they were filthy before we offered that prayer? If we do not admit such, then our prayer is

not sincere. Do we also believe that, because God is good and also powerful and wants our hearts to be clean, He will in fact make them clean, by the inspiration of His Holy Spirit? If we do not believe that, then our prayer lacks faith — and will not be answered.

When, in the General Confession, we ask God to forgive us our sins, to forgive "all that is past, and grant that we may ever . . . Serve and please Him in the newness of life, are we really convince that we need forgiveness, that we need it because we have in fact sinned "by thought, word, and deed"? If not, then the whole exercise of confessing our sins is pointless. And it is also futile unless we really believe that, because God is merciful, He will indeed "pardon and deliver us."

If we are not so convinced (of our need) and we do not so believe (that God will give us what we need), then conviction and belief are the very things we need to pray for. And when God has answered that prayer, then we will be ready to offer the others. The Syrian woman that Our Lord tested so severely has given us a very high standard of faith, the faith that leads to prayer "without ceasing." Most of us will not attain that standard before we die. But even with little faith, we might ask God to give us greater.

If we find the Gentile woman's example daunting, if we doubt that Christ will ever be able to say to us, "Great is thy faith," then remember that the Gospels give us other examples as well — like Peter, the disciple upon whom Our Lord said he would erect His Church. Peter was so sure he could not fail His Master that God had to let him fail miserably before He could do anything with him. St Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, did not have the faith of the woman whom he had asked Jesus to turn away — at least not to begin with. So, you see, we have more than one model of faith

in the New Testament. We have an example of great faith, and we have an example of little faith — the faith of a nameless Gentile woman, and the faith of a man on whom Jesus said He would build His Church. There is always a place to begin, and there is a place, too, where we must end. Let prayer take us all the way -- praying for faith, and faithfully praying.

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