SUNDAY OF THE CANAANITE
February 6

THE GOSPEL READING
Matthew 15:21-28
[A Gentile with Great Faith]

At that time, Jesus went to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

THE SERMON

Jesus went to the region of Tyre and Sidon, which were port cities in what today are parts of Lebanon and Syria, but in the Old Testament times, they were cities where the inhabitants of Canaan (known as “Canaanites”) dwelt. The Canaanites were not Jewish, and they did not worship the God of Israel but worshiped many deities. This is important to notice because the passage shows us the great faith of a Gentile woman who was not part of the Jewish nation and yet was blessed by the Lord.

The woman came to Jesus because she had already heard of Him and had faith in
Him. At the beginning of their encounter, she addresses Him in three ways that demonstrate her faith: she asks for His mercy, calls Him Lord, and addresses Him as the Son of David. Her request, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!” is timeless. There are many needs in our lives, but above all things, we need the mercy of God. Everything else can be added or even included in this request or short prayer. The Church Fathers say that “Lord have mercy” (Κύριε ελέησον in Greek) is the strongest prayer. It includes all we need. We ask for mercy – for ourselves, our loved ones, and the whole world – and God knows what else we need even before we ask, and is pleased to grant His blessings.

Saint Porphyrios said that the word “me” in the Jesus prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me”) does not mean that it is a prayer exclusively for the individual, but for Adam, Eve, and the entire human race. Therefore, the Canaanite woman gives us, in a few words, the essence of Christian theology: we ask the Lord for that which He came to accomplish in His love, namely, the redemption of all.

The Canaanite woman had an urgent need: her daughter was possessed by an evil spirit. She comes with a desperate plea to the Lord because she had heard of Him, had faith that He was the Messiah, and had the power to heal her daughter. Even as a Gentile, she calls Him “Lord” and “Son of David” – the former being a title used for God, and the latter a title for the Messiah. Immediately, however, she encountered difficulties. At first, Jesus did not answer her, and then the disciples asked Him to send her away.

The Lord then tests her, saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The ministry of the Messiah has always been for all people, and not only to the Israelites, as promised in the Old Testament. He is the Savior of all people. Yet He came first to Israel as promised to our shared forefathers and invoked their memory to inspire the Canaanite woman to deeper faith. She was not an Israelite, but Jesus knew that her faith was great. She makes a heartfelt and straightforward request: “Lord, help me,” as she kneels before Him in humility and worship.

Yet the Lord tests her, saying, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She responded: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” The Lord challenged her in gentle irony, criticizing the prejudices of the time. The Israelites used to refer to the Gentiles – that is, non-Jews – as “dogs” (κύνες in Greek). Jesus alludes to this, not to insult the woman but to emphasize her great faith. For even after she is rebuffed, she still persists, confident in the mercy of the Lord.

She says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” The Lord marvels at her reply, praises her faith, and heals her daughter immediately. Through her perseverance, faith, and trust, her daughter is restored to life. As Saint John Chrysostom says, “Do you see how this woman, too, contributed not a little to the healing of her daughter? For note that Christ did not say, “Let your little daughter be made whole,” but “Great is your faith, be it done for you as you desire.”

The Canaanite woman is an example of humility. Her answer is not only wise but
also humble and full of faith. Her example teaches us not to give up in times of trial and temptation. The great faith of the Gentile woman was tested by the Lord three times because He was encouraging her trust and perseverance. He knew that she had faith, and He wanted to teach us, through her example, what faith means.

Jesus had gone to the region of Tyre and Sidon, already expecting to meet the woman. As God the Son, He knew of her daughter’s condition and intended to heal her and bless her mother all along. The Lord loves us, and therefore He desires us to be united with Him, to persevere in faith, grow in trust, and receive His Grace even when circumstances seem difficult. For the Canaanite woman, what initially seemed like a “no” was, in reality, a “yes” from the Lord. She hoped to get just crumbs from His table, but He, who is Himself the Bread of Life, makes her a partaker of His spiritual banquet. He grants her request, heals her daughter, and makes them members of His Kingdom.

We all experience trials in this life, whether they consist of illness, pain, failure, complicated relationships, or other discouragements. Sometimes we pray, and the Lord does not seem to answer immediately. We sometimes feel like King David, saying, “How long, O Lord?” (Psalm 12:1). Yet the Lord never forgets us, is never too busy, and never sends us away. He answers in His own time and manner and wishes us to seek Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).

May we ever persevere in our trust in the Lord Jesus and His love for us. He is not far, and He hears our cries. He seeks us even before we seek Him. He knows what we need, even better than we know it, and nothing is too difficult for Him. When we seek the Lord with faith and perseverance, He responds to our prayers. If He seems not to answer immediately, He might be inviting us to recognize our need for Him more deeply and to draw closer to Him. Let us, therefore, be persistent like the Canaanite woman and take courage in the Lord’s immeasurable mercy.

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