



SUNDAY OF THE CAANANITE

January 29

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 Christ came to save the world and to bring light and healing to all people. He began His ministry in the nation of Israel, the ancient people of God, and He also brought the Gospel to many who were not part of the Jewish people. Many times He did so as He traveled. When He went to the region of Tyre and Sidon – cities in what today are parts of Lebanon and Syria – He was traveling in areas where the Gentiles lived. The term "Gentile" means those not of Jewish heritage and faith. 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.



GREEK ORTHODOX
ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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 we need even before we ask. He is pleased to grant His blessings to those who ask.

Saint Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia says 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 what 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 has faith that He is the Messiah and that He can heal her daughter. Even as a Gentile, she calls Him "Lord" and "Son of David." In love and humility, out of a longing heart, she recognizes Him as the Messiah and her Savior. Because of her genuine faith and great hope, she does not hesitate even in the face of being in the presence of His disciples, who might have thought she was not worthy to address Him.

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 He was sent only to the lost sheep 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 to fulfill God's promises to His ancient people. The Lord never forgets His promises, and His love is without a change of heart.

He comes to Israel first, but then He brings His grace to the whole world because the Lord Jesus never diminishes His grace or excludes people, quite the contrary. At this point, then, the Lord answers the woman to inspire her to deeper faith. He loved her and knew that she would persevere and develop even greater trust because she loved much. Therefore, she makes a heartfelt and straightforward request: "Lord, help me," as she kneels before Him in humility and worship.

Lord tests her again, saying it was unfair 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's words to her were an *incentive* for her to grow in faith, and they were also a *criticism* of the prejudices of the time. The Israelites used to refer to the Gentiles as "dogs" (κύνες in Greek). Jesus alludes to this *not* to insult the woman but

to *emphasize* His great love for her, a *beloved* human being. Even after she is challenged, she persists, confident in the mercy of the Lord.

The Lord marvels at her reply, praises her faith, and heals her daughter immediately. Through her perseverance and trust, the woman and the daughter are restored to life in their respective ways. 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 unrelenting love and deep humility. Her answer is wise, and her perseverance results from her faith. Her example teaches us not to give up in times of trial and temptation.

When the Lord went to Tyre and Sidon, He was already expecting to meet the woman. As the Son of God, Who knows all things, He already knew of her daughter's condition and intended to heal her and bless her mother all along. The Lord loves us, so He desires us to be united with Him, persevere in faith, and grow in trust. This opens the door for us to 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 *crumbs* from His table, but He, who is Himself the *Bread of Life*, made 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, including illness, pain, failure, difficult relationships, or other discouragements. Sometimes we pray, and the Lord seems to wait to answer. Sometimes we feel like saying, "How long, O Lord?" Yet the Lord never forgets us, is never too busy, and never sends us away. He answers in His own time and manner. He wishes us to seek Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

If we persevere in our trust in His love for us, we will find Him. 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, 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 draw closer to Him. If we are persistent like the Canaanite woman and take courage in the Lord's immeasurable mercy, He makes all things new in our lives.