

### ***The Silence of the Shepherd***

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: As we encounter our Lord Jesus in the Gospel accounts, we sometimes come across stories that make us a little uncomfortable. We read along and just when we think we have Jesus all figured out, suddenly we stumble into an episode that just doesn't fit the portrait. Today's Gospel lesson, the story of the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus, is one of the tough ones.

Leading up to this story in St. Matthew's Gospel, we see the Jesus we know and are used to. He's out healing people, teaching sublime truths, speaking words of comfort and peace; we've seen him have compassion on the hungry crowds that have come flocking to him, and miraculously feed them. We've seen him walk out on the churning surface of the Sea of Galilee to rescue the disciples who feared for their lives in a storm. This is the Jesus we like to think of: a heart full of love, helping the helpless, and using his divine power to overcome all human problems.

And then we get today's story in which we see a different side of Jesus. He's led the disciples west toward the coast to have some time for rest and private instruction with them away from the crowds that are always thronging about them. This is Gentile country. The only Jews who come here are merchants heading for the international trading centers in the important port cities of Tyre and Sidon. It's the perfect place for a quiet spiritual retreat. But word that the miracle-working prophet from Galilee is in the area soon gets around. And before long, a local woman comes to Jesus in the hope that he might help her. She is a mother whose daughter is suffering terribly from demons that have taken hold of her tiny body. We can well imagine this woman's anguish as she was forced to sit by helplessly and watch her little child waste away in the grips of these powerful unclean spirits. Now she has an inkling of hope. She pours out her heart to Jesus. Her situation is absolutely heart wrenching. And Jesus won't even give her the time of day.

His response to her seems so out of character. We've not seen Jesus like this. He comes across as indifferent to human suffering. He's bigoted. And then, to make matters worse, we see him insulting this poor woman who is in desperate need. When she sees she's getting nowhere with him, she tries to get Jesus to help by begging the disciples; but not even their intercession on her behalf can persuade Jesus to change his mind. And yes, it's true that based on the translation in the reading, and from what you may have heard in the past, you may think that the disciples are the villains in this story. When they say, "Send her away, Jesus", it sounds like they're asking him to tell her to get lost; but a better translation of what they say is "Release her" or "Set her free". The truth is that they are asking Jesus to grant her request. Now, their hearts are not in the right place. Their primary motive is ending the annoyance they suffer as a result of her constant pleading; but don't think for a moment that these men are not moved by the cries of a mother for her child. Instead, they are probably just as shocked as we are when the Jesus they thought they understood coldly turns her down: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

We've never seen Jesus like this. Or have we? I wonder ... how many times have you earnestly poured out your heart to God on behalf of someone who was suffering, perhaps even for yourself, only to be met with a stony silence from heaven. You've heard accounts of miracles, of wondrous recoveries from terminal illnesses, of angels intervening to prevent catastrophes, and you ask, "Lord, if you can do it for them, then why won't you do it for me?" ... And still, there's no answer. So you pray more fervently, and perhaps you enlist the aid of others to pray for you –

because somehow we've got it into heads that prayers are like votes or signatures on a petition: "If we can just get enough of them, then God is sure to listen." Or you might even try to enlist the prayers of the right people, because you imagine that certain people, maybe pastors, or elders, or some very clean-living folks you might know, are more likely to hold sway with God. (Of course, this woman had no less than all twelve of Jesus' handpicked disciples pulling for her and it didn't seem to help any.)

But you keep at it, though still, even with all the prayers, God seems to be ignoring you. And then, perhaps, instead of seeing signs of improvement in the problem you've laid out before him, things take a turn for the worse. It's like insult on top of the injury. You want to know, "Lord, why are you doing this to me?" Like the writer of this morning's Psalm, you ask: "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" "This is no way to treat me. I bring you my problems like you said I should, and things only get worse." And so, what happens? You get discouraged. You give up. Why? It's clear enough, isn't it? God doesn't care. What's the point of asking? He's made up his mind and he's not going to help. And then you get angry with him because he *could* help, but for some unknown reason he's being mean and stingy. Maybe this story of the Canaanite woman makes us uncomfortable not because it's a side of Jesus we're not used to seeing; but rather because it's a side we know only too well. We know what it's like when the Shepherd is silent, and we don't like it.

And that's what makes this woman so remarkable. She doesn't let Jesus' apparent lack of pity dissuade her even for an instant. She remains focused on the three things she knows: she's got a terrible problem, Jesus has the power to help her, and Jesus has shown himself to be compassionate. She knows all about the deep racial tensions that exist between her people and the Jews. She probably hates Jews herself. It's a bitter pill to swallow to have to grovel at the feet of one of them. But right now that doesn't matter: She believes that Jesus can help, and she believes he will.

She makes no claims at all for herself. She offers no reason that Jesus should give her mercy. When Jesus insults her people by calling them dogs, she presents no argument. Instead, she agrees: "Yes, I'm not worthy. Not fit for the least of your mercies. If, in your wisdom, you choose to bless some more than others, that's okay with me. Let the Jews have their feast on the finest and best. All I'm asking for is a crumb that might drop from their overflowing table."

I wonder how many of us, in the same situation, would have stuck it out? How many of us would instead have stormed off in a huff, "If that's what I've got to go through to get some help, I'd rather not have it. Just who does he think he is, anyway?"

And *that* is *exactly* the problem. Who *does* he think he is? Well, he thinks he's the Lord God Almighty, of course! And he's right. The real questions are: "Who do *you* think he is?" and "*Who do you think you are?*" You see, the anger and discouragement we feel when our prayers are not answered according to our timetable and the way we think they should come from losing perspective of who's who. The impulse that causes us to refuse to humble ourselves before him like this woman did has a name: it's called sinful pride and arrogance. We tend to think of receiving God's grace and mercy as some kind of right or entitlement instead of what it is: an *undeserved* gift. We forget who we are and what place we occupy in the great scheme of things. We forget that we are rebellious, wretched sinners who aren't in Hell right now only because of God's great forbearance. Complain or become angry because he doesn't answer a prayer like you want or when you want? It's absurd! Rather thank him with all your heart that he gives you the opportunity to ask!

Likewise, getting easily discouraged when the Shepherd is silent comes from forgetting who our Lord is and what he is like. Discouragement comes from not believing what God has told us about himself in the Scripture. Because if you really believed what he's told us, you would trust that God will, without exception, do for you always, only, what is the absolutely the best for you – even when it doesn't appear that way. He proved it when he gave up for you his own Son to die in your place. If he's already given us what he values most to save us from Hell, how can we begin to think that there's anything else he wouldn't give us for our good?

And now we see the reason our Lord treated this woman the way he did. It wasn't to hurt her. It was to expose the human pride that caused her to resist humbling herself before him. It was to elicit in her greater trust in the merciful character of God. He did it to cut away the dead branches of unbelief and pride so that the beautiful flowers of humble, childlike faith could bloom. It was to bring her into deeper faith; a faith which he now holds up as an example to all of us. "O Woman, great is your faith!" So, we can be sure that when we are in the same situation, when heaven seems silent, it isn't a lack of concern, or stinginess, or cruelty on his part. It is rather an opportunity for us to receive and exercise the great faith displayed by this woman. It's the kind of faith expressed by Job who, when he lost everything and was in misery, said, "I don't care how bad it gets. Even if he kills me, I'll still trust in him." That's great faith. And really, it is through this kind of process that he does kill us: he kills the prideful old nature and the doubter in each of us so that the great faith he cherishes can shine forth.

We are left wondering, however, how this Gentile woman obtained such a great faith. We know that faith comes from hearing God's Word. It's by the word that the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts. And yet, it's almost certain that she had no synagogue to attend. Rarely, if ever, did she have opportunity to hear God's truth. In this too, she is remarkable. She calls Jesus, "Lord, Son of David". It's a messianic title. So she's not completely ignorant of the God of Israel. She knows something of the promised Messiah and trusts that Jesus is he. More than that, she trusts that Jesus will help her even though she is a Gentile.

Perhaps she knew the story of her fellow country woman, the widow of Zarephath, who, many centuries earlier, when all Israel was in a state of apostasy, believed what the prophet Elijah told her, and shared with him her last little bit of food. As a consequence, she and her son were miraculously provided with food during three years of famine. And later, when her son died, God gave him back to her from the dead. Or maybe she had heard some of God's promises like we heard in today's Old Testament reading, in which God declares that he will gather believers from all the nations. We don't know how much she had heard, but we do know that whatever snippets and crumbs of God's truth had fallen to her from Smorgasbord of Scripture God provided to the Jews had been snatched up and held to her heart like her most valued possessions. She treasured them, because it was by them she knew that Jesus was her Savior too.

In this way too, she is an example to us. Like the Jews in the time of Christ, we have the full feast of God's Word available to us. We can worship every week, attend Bible study, read the Scriptures in our own homes. And too often, like the Jews, we take these opportunities for granted. I have found over the years that the people who tend to value God's promises and his Word most are the ones who know what is like to live without them. They know what it is like when the Shepherd is silent; and they never want to go back there. That was certainly the case for this woman. My prayer is that we can all learn from her example and learn to appreciate what it must have been like for her to be told, "You don't need to sit under the table and eat crumbs. See, I've set a place for you here at the feast."

So, may all we continue to treasure God's word like she did, and take every advantage to hear it, so that by it the Holy Spirit can work faith in our hearts. And may we also learn to understand that in times of the Shepherd's apparent silence, that our God is acting in love to work in us the great faith in which he delights – for in this faith, we too will be saved. May he grant to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***