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POINTS BULLETIN

For Liturgical Year A

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gospel

Matthew 15:21-28

Then Jesus went from that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not say a word in answer to her. His disciples came and asked him, "Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us." He said in reply, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the woman came and did him homage, saying, "Lord, help me." He said in reply, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." Then Jesus said to her in reply, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that hour.

Commentary

Christ the Lord

For the last few Sundays, the Church has presented us with Jesus' teaching. Now, as Christ takes his small band of twelve disciples away from Jewish lands and into the Phoenician territory around Tyre and Sidon in order to put the final touches on their training before suffering his passion, we he again shows forth his power as he casts out a demon with merely a word.

The miracles of Christ are referred to in scripture as "signs and wonders," the same kind of signs and wonders that manifested God's presence in the Old Testament. They show that Christ is of God, that God is at work in Christ, and they are meant to stir up faith in him. Someone who demonstrates such power, and who wields it with such self-restraint, must either be accepted as God's messenger or rejected as the devil's lackey, but he should not be ignored. All three reactions appear in the Gospels; which corresponds to our own?

Christ the Teacher

The heart of God can be moved. Jesus had a particular mission to accomplish; the age of the universal Church was still waiting in the wings while he worked among the Jews. The parameters of this mission did not include Canaanites (ancestral enemies of the Israelites). But the woman had what Christ's heart yearns for: love, faith, and humility. She was seeking a miracle for the sake of her beloved daughter and at her own expense (imagine how humiliating it would be to tag along behind a Rabbi in public screaming to get his attention). And she believed in Christ. It is hard to imagine how she had come to believe in him. Perhaps her initial faith was quite small (she calls him "Son of David", which could be a merely political title), but contact with him increased it (at last she came and "did him homage", as to a divinity). In any case, she knew that he could do it. She also knew that he would not do it because she deserved it, but because he cared. She was not angry with God for sending this trial; she did not come to Jesus furiously demanding justice. She accepted the trial and recognized that the miracle would be no less a gift than existence itself. This enabled her to take the insult and come right back with another petition to the Lord. Love, faith, and humility: these are the secret ingredients for prayer that moves the heart of God – even a prayer so simple as: "Lord, help me."

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Christ the Friend

The dialogue between Jesus and the Canaanite woman shows how eager Christ is to fill us with the Joy of his Kingdom. His objection to the woman's first petition must not have been too enthusiastic, at least, she saw something in his eyes or heard something in his voice that encouraged her to persevere. Even the harsh insult he levels against her (we should note that it is possible to say harsh things in a gentle way, which may have been the case here) seems designed to elicit an even greater act of faith than she had already made. The bottom line is that he was willing to be convinced; he allowed her faith to change his agenda, something even friends do rarely. This flexibility shows the readiness of his love.

Questions for Reflection

1. Considering the many reasons that our faith ought to be at least as strong as the Canaanite woman's (we have the testimony of Christ's resurrection and of 2000 years of the life of the Church), why is it often so weak?
2. What do you think the disciples would have learned from this encounter? How would they have reacted?
3. Imagine the reaction of Christ's heart to this woman's sincere and persevering prayer; compare that to how he might react to your prayer: does he find in it the same love and humility and faith he found in hers?

Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, #s 547-550 on the meaning of Christ's miracles, 2734-2745 on trust and perseverance in prayer.

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