

SUNDAY OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN St Matt. 15:21-28

We have now arrived at one of the familiar Sundays on the path leading up to Lent, namely the interesting account of Christ's encounter with a Canaanite woman. We know from St Mark's version of the event, which by chance was read in the appointed gospels for last week, and in which she is called a Syro-Phoenician, that the Lord had gone down to the coastlands of Sidon and Tyre presumably for a rest. Despite his being in hiding, this woman whose daughter had a demon, had carefully sought him out and like a dog with a bone, refused to give up till she had secured her daughter's release from the unclean spirit. She achieves this by beating the Lord in an argument through her simple faith and especially through her humility, which constrains him to acknowledge defeat and grant her request.

The gospels contain a number of incidents where Christ encounters great faith among those who are not of the House of Israel and is deeply impressed. In the Acts of the Apostles we read of the centurion Cornelius, a god-fearing, kind man, who is told in a vision to seek out Peter in the city of Joppa and to bring him to his house in Caesarea. Before the messengers arrive, Peter has a vision in which he is told that nothing which God has made is unclean and this prepares him for the meeting with the Roman centurion. This of course is strictly forbidden by his religion. During this meeting in which Peter is telling those assembled about the good news of Christ, the Holy Spirit falls on the audience and Peter orders them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

Recently I have been reading some talks of Metropolitan Anthony given towards the end of his life and published posthumously in a collection entitled 'On the Light that shines in the Darkness'. In one of them he speaks about receiving letters from Russia accusing him of not being Orthodox in his teaching, which is either simply heretical or not thought out. Also, he quotes a letter from a Ukrainian deacon in which he states his incredulity at the Metropolitan's failure to believe that only members of the Orthodox Church will enter eternal life. In response the Metropolitan speaks about what it means to be a member of the Orthodox Church. Is it enough to take without thought, without understanding the truth presented in the Creed and in the writings of the spiritual guides of Orthodoxy? Is it enough to proclaim the Orthodox faith without living up to its exacting standards of love and service to Christ? And then he goes on to tell a story of a priest who told him of a case where he asked a prospective godfather if he was baptised. "Yes", he replied. "Did he believe in God?" "No", he replied. "I am an atheist." "Then why did you get baptised?" Then the man looked at him with surprise and a degree of indignation and said, "I am not a dog not to be baptised". Can such a man claim what his correspondent called being an Orthodox? And what about the number of cases at a baptism where the Creed is as new and unfamiliar to a godparent as a coconut tree to an eskimo and the godparent has to be helped through its recitation. And then there is an interesting passage attributed to the writings of St Philaret of Moscow, who says, "The little walls that divide us as Christians do not reach up to heaven. They are on our level and for our size. We are divided because we make assertions, state definitions which are true or less true, but there is another dimension in the life of a person which is far beyond this."

Some of us here will remember the life of Nicolas Zernov, a co-founder of this church and community and of the three properties which surround it. His wife, Militza, told me how in his early years in the UK he remained adamant that only the Orthodox Church had the truth and the other churches were heretical. Then as he became more familiar with those churches and its members, he noted their deep faith and the quality of their lives as human beings and began to embrace them as beloved brothers and sisters and to work for their unity in Christ, while remaining true to his own Mother Church.

There is an aspect of judgement when we condemn others for their beliefs which we are strictly forbidden to make. "Who are you to judge the servant of another," writes St Paul. "It is before his own

master that he stands or falls.” And the Lord in the Sermon on the Mount warns us, “Judge not, that you be not judged”. Our own sins are enough for judgement and to occupy our undevoted attention.

If we push this statement about salvation a bit further, says Metropolitan Anthony, can we really imagine that while we are burning below in the fires of hell our mothers and/or fathers (hopefully both) are looking down from heaven above and saying, “Well it’s your own fault. We did warn you but you wouldn’t listen”. Does that condemnation or washing of hands fit with the practical love we experienced from them and if we have by God’s grace felt it from human creatures, how can we not imagine it from a God who sacrificed himself to save the world. This reminds me of what I often say to those who confess the sins of bitterness, jealousy and hatred towards a person and cannot bring themselves to pray for that person as Christ’s words command us to do. Imagine that this person is standing before the judgement seat of Christ and you have the power to save him or her by interceding. Would you stand by and let it happen or would you act like the real mother of the disputed baby before King Solomon and throw yourself on the person to save them from the raised axe.

At the end of St Mark’s Gospel there is an interesting statement. “These signs will accompany those who believe. By my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands and if they drink any deadly thing it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick and they will recover.” We strive towards God. We offer him our limited service but if this is the measure of being Orthodox, how many of us can claim to have reached that level?

Fr Lev Gillet, who was a former chaplain to the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, was once asked whether it was not only people who are technically Orthodox who enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He replied, “There are things which are matters of faith but things which are matters of hope and hope is not any less than faith in the eyes of God.”

To return to the two incidents which I have quoted today. Both of these figures are Gentiles outside the true faith of Israel but living devout lives and full of humility and hope. In a minute I shall read the special prayer sent by Archbishop Jean to our Exarchate. It speaks about the humility of regarding others as better than ourselves. With this humility and with the determination in prayer which we are strongly urged to practise and never give up we can and must, regardless of the titles we bear, continue in hope for the salvation of the world which is our task here on earth as faithful servants of our master Jesus Christ.

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