SUNDAY OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN St Matthew 15:21-28

Some weeks ago the Gospel appointed to be read for the Sunday after the Feast of the Theophany was about Jesus taking over the mantle of John the Baptist, who had been arrested, and preaching repentance for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. We were told about the people who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death seeing a great light in a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus has now begun his earthly ministry as he says in his own words to the ‘lost house of Israel’ but it is clear from the gospel accounts that he is destined to have a great effect on the Gentiles outside the fold and on those people who are anathema to the Jews, most notably the Samaritans and then perhaps the pagan Romans. We know from the end of St John’s gospel that there were so many startling events that in his words ‘all the books of the world could not contain them’. On first appearances it is difficult to believe that but when we think of the thousands in the crowds that followed him and that he healed them all, perhaps our initial scepticism is challenged as so many could write a personal story of what God through his Son had done for them. However, given the dimension of his 3 year ministry it is quite remarkable that the four evangelists or especially the three synoptic writers have such an agreement on what were the most poignant events in Christ’s ministry.

Today’s story of the Canaanite woman, or rather the Syro-Phoenician as she is called in Mark’s account in chapter 7, is clearly one of those striking events. Whereas the miracles of Christ such as feeding the five thousand, which immediately precedes this account, and the raising of the widow of Nain’s dead son are so striking that they cannot possibly be omitted, it is interesting to ask why a miracle performed so far away in Tyre where Christ has gone for a rest after an exhausting period in his ministry should be included. But if we examine closely a few of these incidents involving Gentiles: the Roman centurion, the Samaritan woman and the Canaanite woman it is clear that the one common element in them is immense faith in God which arrests and brings great joy to Christ even in his tiredness. He is simply astonished by the faith and humility of the centurion who confesses his worldliness compared with the other-worldliness of Christ himself. “I am not worthy that thou should come under the roof of my house”, words which have become fixed in our prayers. And he exclaims unequivocally, “Never in Israel have I found such faith”. He goes on to say too “Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac but the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness”. And what an insult to his own race since this new heir is from Rome the current master of the Judaean peoples. In some ways we can see this effect in the life of the late Metropolitan Anthony. A priest is sent from Paris to serve the immigrant Russian Orthodox community and in twenty-five years a large cathedral is purchased and filled with more non-Russians than Russians.

At one level in today’s reading we could read it superficially and say that Christ needs a lesson in manners indirectly calling this poor lady a dog or perhaps more aptly a bitch. But the truth is that even in his exhaustion he recognises a great seed of faith which needs to be encouraged and so he draws her into an argument in which she is so respectfully but completely victorious, “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master’s table”. And this battle with God’s Anointed brings the miracle which had been hoped for – the healing of her daughter. In another context Christ asks a father who has brought a sick son to him for healing, “Do you believe that I can do this?” And the honest reply comes back, “I believe. Help Thou my unbelief!”

But what does this call to increased faith have to say to us here and now. We have been baptised and chrismated and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are told it is within us like a small mustard seed, which will grow to great dimensions as we continue in the faith through the joys and pains of life which we will inevitably encounter. It is alive not dormant under the tender care of God’s hand and that is why during the Holy God, the Bishop comes out and with uplifted hands prays most movingly “Lord, look down and see and visit this vineyard which thy right hand has planted”.

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But there is much to be done on our part too; it is not simply enough to wait for God to act. There are certain acts which will prepare us for God’s movements in our lives and certain basic realisations which nourish our faith. Prayer of course is central to this. Regularly drawing close to God in words or in silence. This brings home to us the greatness and beauty of God. How wonderful to have had some sunny winter mornings recently which lift our souls after the continual fog and overcast skies of January. I have just been re-reading a publication of the writings of the brutally martyred Russian priest Alexander Men on prayer. He counsels people who are serious about praying to find 5 or 6 minutes in the morning and/or the evening or during the day to sit in silence before God and try to come into his presence. And in connection with this there is the remembrance of his closeness and love for us even in our sinfulness. Philaret of Moscow has this wonderful phrase in one of his prayers, which I ask you to forgive me for quoting so often, “You love me more than I myself know how to love”. In the Sermon on the Mount we are told that ‘even the hairs on our heads are numbered’. In my case not a difficult job. In the morning prayer to the Mother of God we pray that she will remove from us “despair, forgetfulness, lack of understanding and negligence’. Forgetfulness must include God’s love for each of us as individuals made in his image. This is something we should never forget.

And then there is the regular distancing of ourselves from earthly things through fasting, which brings us back to our correct spiritual orientation namely the realisation that the only thing that ultimately matters is that I am in Christ and He is in me.

The woman in today’s Gospel suffers with a sick daughter. Others like the woman with the flow of blood have suffered for thirty-eight years and Christ in another parable stresses how important it is for us to persevere in prayer and never give up. If we keep knocking he will have to get out of bed and answer us as we learn in the parable of the unjust judge. He reassures us that Our Father in Heaven is like an earthly one who will never give a son a stone when he asks for bread. The two women have specific requests to make of Christ as we do too from time to time but above all we are told to pray for the Holy Spirit and his gifts of love, joy, peace, patience which the Father longs to give us. And when we receive answers to our prayers let us bless the Lord in our thankfulness to him as only the Samaritan leper did in the Gospel of some Sundays ago.

As we journey together through these preparatory weeks of Lent may God grant us such an unyielding faith like the Canaanite woman of today’s Gospel, who is not prepared to take ‘no’ for an answer, even from God.

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