

Lent 2
(Gospel)

I take as my text today from St. Matthew's Gospel:

Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

The Gospel passage we read today from St. Matthew is one of my favorites — not my very favorite but close because it hits so close to home for the lesson it teaches. What is that lesson?

Let's start with the Propers — Collect, Epistle, and Gospel — they give us pause to think about not only our faith in God, in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, but also in our own humility. Now, we're getting closer to home — faith and humility.

Truly, how great is our faith? Enough to move mountains?

What about our humility? Do we recognize in the sight of God the extent of our own unworthiness?

If we do claim to possess great faith and true humility, what about our love: the breadth, depth, and height of our love?

In the Collect, we are reminded that we have ***no power of ourselves to help ourselves***; that we, indeed, are dependent upon God to defend us from all adversities, both physical and spiritual, that may harm us, including evil thoughts.

That we have ***no power of ourselves to help ourselves*** is quite sobering; to fully comprehend its implication requires of us a sense of ***humility***, an admission that we are helpless without God, and the acknowledgment that we are less than the superior beings we think we are.

That is a sobering thought in today's world — that we are less than the superior beings we think we are.

In the Epistle passage from St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, we find that as Christians we have a higher calling that requires us to exercise spiritual and physical discipline, and to reign in our thoughts. Failure to do so is an affront to God; but, because we are by nature frail and weak, he has provided his Holy Spirit to enable us in fulfilling our higher calling.

Then, in the Gospel passage from St. Matthew, in the story of the Canaanite woman, we see the Collect and Epistle come together in a real, down-to-earth narrative of one person's plight.

We see an example of faith, such that we may hold up against our own.

We see an example of true humility.

And we see an expression of both divine and human love.

The account of the Canaanite woman, given by St. Matthew, is magnificent in that we see all of these aspects in play during a brief encounter between our Lord and an outcast mother.

Furthermore, it represents one of only two recorded instances of Jesus exercising his compassion and healing gifts for the benefit of Gentiles, the other instance being the healing of the centurion's servant.

Interesting to note that, in both instances of the healing of Gentiles, the cure is produced from a distance, perhaps, giving a heightened sense of the separation between Judaism and the Gentile world.

In St. Matthew's passage, we see Jesus and his disciples on the outskirts of Tyre and Sidon. This was, essentially, a heathen area where, presumably, Jesus would be able to find some anonymity and could, for a time, find respite as he prepared to continue His journey to the Cross.

Yet, his fame precedes him. There, where he sought anonymity and rest, he is sought out by a Canaanite woman in desperate need.

But who is this Canaanite woman?

Essentially, she belonged to a group that Josephus referred to as Tyrian, more hated than just ordinary heathens — a member of one of the nations the Jews were to have exterminated. St. Mark called her *a Greek, Syro-phoenician by race*; that is, she spoke Greek but was of Syrian background, of the Syrians who lived in Phoenicia, and who, in turn, were descendants of the Canaanites.

The encounter is brief; but it is a marvelous story, if only for the exchange that takes place between Jesus and the heathen woman.

A synopsis of the story goes like this:

The woman cries out to Jesus. He ignores her. She persists, and he responds, verbally distancing himself from her. Still, she persists, and even worships him, only to be referred to as a dog. Finally, though, her persistence pays off, and Jesus acknowledges her faith and grants her request.

Even if we were to stop at this point, there is at least the lesson that persistence and faith will be rewarded; but a closer look reveals much more.

Though living apart from the Jews in a territory close to where our Lord sought anonymity, this heathen woman not only had heard of Jesus but also knew a great deal about him, especially that he was descended from David, indicating how far his fame had spread from Galilee.

Now, in those days, Jews referred to Gentiles, or heathens, as dogs. They reasoned that heathens, or idolaters, like dogs, were uncircumcised, and worse; they were no better than the savage mongrels that roamed the streets in search of food — the worst of the worst.

In contrast, Jesus often referred to the Jews as children; indeed, they considered themselves to be God's Children.

As Jesus addresses the Canaanite woman, though, he uses a kinder expression that denotes little dogs or household pets, as opposed to the street dogs and mongrels that roamed about.

The woman cleverly responds to our Lord's metaphor: if the Gentiles are being referred to as household dogs, rather than the street scavengers, then it is only right that they should be fed with the crumbs from their masters' tables.

This reference to the crumbs is to the custom of that day of using bread, instead of napkins to wipe the hands, then throwing the fragments to the dogs that were generally about the table.

The woman, while engaging in the lively exchange with Jesus, displays a certain humility and cheerfulness; she willingly accepts the title of a dog, demonstrating at the same time a resilient attitude and sensibility.

Finally, our Lord demonstrates his great compassion and love, granting her request, and her daughter, who is vexed with a devil, is healed.

There is a certain beauty in this story, even if it appears that Jesus is in a way taunting the woman before granting her request. But the tone of the language used by Jesus was gently whimsical, even half-humorous, despite the appearance that he is taunting her.

The language — that is why it is so necessary to keep scripture in context.

Looking more closely at the passage, we can find at least three reasons for the approach Jesus uses with the Canaanite woman:

First, to test the strength of her faith;

Second, to teach her the lesson that persistence and importunity in prayer will finally meet their reward;

Third, to get the attention of his disciples, who were responding without love and compassion, and to teach them that greater faith was often to be found among the heathen than in Israel.

The story also opens up another possibility: the proposition that this was a preview of what was to come, that is, the extension to the Gentiles, to the entire world, of the salvation promised God's Chosen People.

While our Lord's mission was to the Jewish nation, who rejected Him, the promise of salvation was destined for all people through the Israel of God. Indeed, that destiny could only be fulfilled through the perfect obedience of Sonship, obedience even unto the **Cross**.

For the most part, Israel rejected the salvation promised by Christ; while, in contrast, the Gentiles embraced by faith the Good News with an humble sense of need, forsaking pride and arrogance, forsaking privilege of class or nationality.

In relating this Gospel passage to us today, there are a number of aspects of the story that draw our attention: persistence, humility, cheerfulness, love, and faith.

Persistence we might easily translate into diligence.

During Lent, we are called to a certain diligence in our spiritual discipline, to include perhaps the physical discipline of fasting, as well as an expansiveness in our prayer life and meditation, indeed, the development of a dynamic prayer life.

Lent is an opportune time to develop our skills in meditation, examining our shortcomings, perhaps utilizing litanies, as found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, or devotional material found in other books. We can entreat God for spiritual strength and guidance for those special needs for which only we as individuals could ask.

One of the truly dynamic aspects of prayer is to effect a change in ourselves, rather than trying to effect a change in God; indeed, the change that occurs in each of us in our relationship to God and our fellow man is a reflection of the success of our prayer life and meditation.

Isn't that one of the objectives of observing a Holy Lent: to effect a change in ourselves?

What about humility?

While we should always offer ourselves humbly before God, now, as a part of our Lenten discipline, is the perfect time to do so, embracing true humility, not self-abasing, not servile; but in true humility, as *a constituent element of love to God and our neighbor*.

We mustn't overlook cheerfulness; perhaps described as the light of hope, and not despair; faith with a smile that shines through the gloom and lights up a face reflecting love and compassion.

Then, Faith about which tomes are written but which, in its simplicity, is the human response to Divine Truth. It is knowing that God the Father created us, God the Son redeemed us, and God the Holy Spirit sanctified us, knowing with such confidence that we can face life and death.

When we speak of faith, there is on the one hand the objective term, defined as the body of Truth found in the Creeds, in the definitions of the Church Councils, in the Bible, in the teachings of the Church Fathers, and expressed most beautifully and completely in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. We call it the Catholic Faith.

On the other hand, it is the subjective term: faith which demands an act of will; it is a supernatural act dependent upon God's action on the soul. It is accepting God's Love and Grace.

As I have said many times, faith is actionable. It depends upon us to put it to use. Lent is a reminder of the need for an abiding faith in God, and diligence in our spiritual development. In life, we do face many adversities that afflict the soul as well as the body, and evil thoughts that act upon our souls. We are daily confronted by our helplessness as human beings and our need for God, for strength as we struggle against the assaults of this world.

Lent helps us to focus on the different elements that come together as we evolve spiritually: love, persistence, humility, cheerfulness, and faith, each dependent upon the other.

For an example to us, we are given the story of the Canaanite woman who demonstrated her love and faith through persistence, seeking in humility a crumb of mercy for her small daughter, and, because of her faith, she received her crumb, and more.

As we continue through the Lenten Season, spiritually preparing for our Lord's victory over sin and death, let us keep in our hearts and minds the example set by the Canaanite woman.

As we offer ourselves in prayer, meditation, and fasting, let us bring to the table an abounding love, an invincible faith, an indomitable persistence, and a spirit of joyfulness.

Let us not be dismayed by the world but led in our discipline to a relationship in Christ that overcomes the world and brings us to everlasting life.

But there is also that humility, that willingness to accept the crumbs under his Table of which we are do unworthy. That we say in the *Prayer of Humble Access*. How often do we really consider what we are saying?

We are not so worthy as to eat those crumbs but through Jesus Christ, they are ours through Faith — through Faith.