

The Gospel last Sunday was the Canaanite woman, in the region of Tyre and Sidon, who came to our Lord and pleaded with Him to deliver her daughter from a demon. While the homily did focus on this, this is such a striking and instructive encounter that it is worth going over again.

First of all, we see that our Lord ventured into the region of Tyre & Sidon. This is Gentile territory, outside of Israel. Jesus hardly ever ventured outside of Israel so this immediately gets our attention. What are you doing there, Lord? There must be something there, something out of the ordinary. What could it be?

Jesus comes to the region and the lady approaches Him with her plea. Notice what our Lord does and does not do. He does not arrive, run over to her, throw His arms around her and say something like: I'm ok, you're ok. In fact, He doesn't approach her at all. Instead, what He does is make Himself available, and then leaves room for her to respond. What happens if she doesn't respond, if she doesn't approach our Lord? Nothing. She continues on in her misery and torment. The Lord does the same thing with us, with everyone. He makes Himself available, but then leaves room for us to respond. This is necessarily the case because it is the nature of love, the nature of God. Love binds two people together if and only if it is mutual. One-sided love can, and does, exist but it doesn't bind the two together. This is a principle of the spiritual life: our Lord makes Himself available, but we have to respond. It is something to stop and think about. Have I really responded? Could I do better? Maybe with prayer, devotions, study of the faith, or just plain thinking about the Lord some every day, offering every day to Him? If I don't really respond, I don't really build a bond with the Lord. If I don't build a bond with Him, then I will go and stand before a stranger at the time of my death.

The woman approaches our Lord. Who approaches? Is it the one afflicted by the demon, the one needing deliverance? No. The daughter, the one who is actually tormented, is nowhere to be seen; she is presumably still at home. Someone (her mother) is interceding for her. What happens to the daughter if no one intercedes for her? Well, it's hard to say; maybe the Lord would give her some extraordinary grace. But what is clear is that the daughter is not delivered because of her own merits, her own prayers, any of her own actions, or even her own desire – but rather because of the intercession of her mother. The Apostles approach our Lord and say: “Send her away for she keeps calling after us.” This sounds like the Apostles are annoyed by her nagging and just want her to go away. But Aquinas points out that that is not the case, that they are in fact interceding on her behalf. We can see that Aquinas is correct from our Lord's response: I have come only for the lost sheep of Israel. This response wouldn't make sense unless they had asked our Lord to do something for her. Aquinas says that they are saying the opposite of what they mean, as people sometimes do. For example, suppose a teenager is nagging a parent about going somewhere and the parent keeps saying no; finally they say: oh just go on and go then, go ahead and slide in the ditch and get yourself killed on the icy road. This is what the Apostles are doing. They have seen our Lord respond to pleas of mercy over and over again and so they are shocked and confused when He ignores this woman's pleas. So they say: well just send her away then; or maybe something like: what are you going to do, just send her away? In fact, Aquinas argues that one of the reasons our Lord does not respond right away is to give the Apostles a chance to intercede for her.

All of this is to bring out that intercession for others is clearly something our Lord not only approves of but desires. There are people who claim that praying to the saints, seeking their intercession, is somehow contrary to the will of God. Such a claim is just not Scriptural; in fact, it is contrary to what God has revealed. There are numerous times in the Gospels, one of which is this encounter, where Jesus does not act until someone intercedes on behalf of another. The Wedding Feast of Cana would be another prime example. Praying, interceding for others, is also one way to fulfill another of our Lord's commands: love your enemy. Why intercession? We could state it in two equivalent ways. One is because in doing so, a person imitates Christ. This is what our Lord does – He intercedes for us. We could also say it is because the nature of love (of God) is to seek the true good of another.

Let us come back, now, to the fact that our Lord does not immediately respond. Whatever our Lord does in regard to man, He always, always does for our good. So He is doing this for the Canaanite woman's good as

well. We might imagine stretching a rubber band; the more you pull it, the harder it snaps back when you let go of one end. Another reason our Lord delays, then, is because it builds the woman's desire so that when He does respond, it binds them together even more. This is important to bear in mind – the Lord does not always immediately respond, or perhaps He responds in an unexpected way. Only the virtuous can really pray.

Although this has been mentioned at other times, we also have to be careful to not just treat our Lord like a Divine vending machine where I just put in my money (say a few prayers) and then expect to get what I want. Sometimes a person's request does not lie within Divine Providence, it is not what is best for them or for the other person. But prayer is never wasted. The main point of prayer is not getting what I want but rather building relation with the Lord. More to the point, petitionary prayer – which *is* good and should be practiced – should not be the totality of prayer. The point of prayer is to seek the Lord, to build relation with Him. Meditation on the mysteries of the faith, especially our Lord's Passion, is a good example. This also leads to prayers of Thanksgiving. There is no love of God without gratitude to God, and not just gratitude for the things of this life that I want for the here and now, but especially gratitude for His sacrifice, His mercy, His teachings, for the sacraments, in short – for His highest gifts, which are spiritual gifts. Notice that even this Gentile woman understands this. She starts by saying: Have pity on me Lord, Son of David. She calls Him Lord and Son of David (i.e., King). This Gentile woman paid homage to a Jewish Savior. Surely we can do the same!

Before coming to the heart of the matter in this encounter, let's notice one more thing. The mother is clearly suffering. But why is she suffering? It is the daughter who is possessed. It is because she loves her daughter and one effect of this thing called love is that the person shares in both the joys and sufferings of the beloved. Her love for her daughter, *combined with a hardship*, is what led her to Jesus. Would she have been there otherwise? This needs to be remembered when facing hardships – they are meant to draw us closer to the Lord.

This reminds us that we are meant to also share in the joys and sufferings of our Lord – i.e., we are meant to love Him. Blessed are those who mourn. Do I mourn when I see the decimation of faith in the world, when I see our Lord and His saints mocked and ridiculed, when I see Him rejected wholesale and even hated? Do I mourn when I see His sacraments neglected, including His sacrament of mercy? Do I love the Lord?

We might look at this Canaanite woman and say – well, she was desperate, she had nowhere else to turn. Is the same not true for me? Or, in my comfort, do I fancy myself self-sufficient, not in need of the Lord? Where else do I have to turn to be saved from eternal hell-fire, for redemption, for mercy, for eternal life. Should I not have the same sense of urgency as this Canaanite woman? Woe to me if I do not.

Now we come to the core of this exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. After the Apostles intercede for her, she makes a simple plea: Lord, help me. And Jesus makes what might at first seem like a strange response: it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs. The woman does not miss a beat. She does not dispute this, she is not outraged, she simply replies: Please Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters. This is stunning. Why was our Lord in the region of Tyre and Sidon? It was to manifest this woman's great virtue. It was to hold her up as an example for all generations to come – for you and I – until the end of time. I look at this Gentile woman and marvel, with great envy (so to speak), at her virtue – her humility, simplicity, trust, faith, hope, and perseverance.

Her trust and faith in the Lord is what led to her perseverance. But, as is always the case, at the root of all her virtue was a great humility. Even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their master's table. This good woman was not infected with the contemporary "heresy of softness" which cannot and will not tolerate even the slightest discomfort, which demands immediate satisfaction and approval of every desire, which pridefully insists on entitlement, and which thus cuts a person off from the mercy of God.

Our Lord Himself holds up this Canaanite woman as a paragon of virtue, as an example for each of us. The only way to make good use of it, according to the will of our Lord, is to spend some time running it through your mind, turning it over and around, until it becomes part of you.

*God bless you. Fr Kuhn*