

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday, January 29, 2012 Faith by Assiduity – The Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15:21-28

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus often preached away from Galilee and Jerusalem, and this morning's Gospel is an example of that. He was in the region of Tyre and Sidon, which is now present-day Lebanon, by the way. Now these two cities were important in both the Old and the New Testaments. Sidon, a port city, was named after the firstborn son of Canaan and was settled by his descendants, who were called Canaanites; they were already well settled in this area 2000 years before Christ. Homer mentions both of these cities in his epic works, the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey". A very sophisticated agriculture people, they worshipped vile fertility gods, who were actually the demons of the weather and the earth, and they made use of ritual sex temple prostitutes in their worship of these demons.

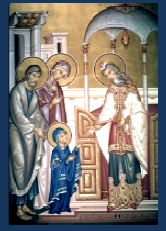
Twenty miles south of Sidon was Tyre, a sort of large rocky island just a few hundred miles off the coast, in the Eastern Mediterranean. A rich plain adjoined this island citadel, and it is from the forests on this plain that the Prophet-King David imported cedar trees for the building of his palace in Jerusalem. Later still, Sidonians and Tryrians were used in the building of the First Temple of Jerusalem. Both Tyre and Sidon were already well settled by Phoenecian/Caananites 2000 years before Christ.

In the sea by these two cities was to be found the Mediterranean mollusk, the murex, from which was extracted the purple dye used in the ancient world. It is from the Greek word for purple that we get the word Phoenicia and this is why the Greeks called the Canaanites Phoenicians, for they harvested these mollusks and their dye. About three hundred years before Christ the whole area of Tyre and Sidon was conquered by Alexander the Great, who added it to his rapidly expanding empire, bringing Greek culture and language to its dwellers. But by the time of Christ it had become a province of the Roman Empire.

Now according to the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the reputation of Jesus had spread as far as Tyre and Sidon in His time and people from that area came south, seeking the Lord, to hear Him and be healed by Him. Eventually Christ came Himself to this area --and when He did so He encountered the woman of this Gospel. Now the inhabitants of Tyre, Sidon, and the surrounding area, although they were part of Israel, were not Jews; they were pagans, as I already pointed out. And the Lord said something about this--and it wasn't very ecumenical by the way. He said of this pagan land that if Tyre and Sidon seen the miracles performed in other cities, they would have long ago repented in sackcloth and ashes (Mt 11:21-24).

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So these people were unbelievers; they were Gentiles, they were idolaters of the worst kind, in fact, and according to the Law of Moses this meant that they were “unclean.” Yet such was the reputation of Christ that one of these pagan women heard about Him and came, begging Him to exorcise her demon-possessed daughter. But Jesus, again not being very ecumenical, responded, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” This meant that His first calling was to the Jews.

He went further and said something that we might today think was very insulting. He said to her: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs”—thus comparing the Canaanites to dogs, which were regarded as unclean animals because they will eat rotting food and even their own feces—so, He was calling her a “dog”. But she, persisting in her appeal, used Christ’s own example and replied: “Yea, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

And in this amazingly simple and even child-like reply to the Lord, she showed not only enormous faith, but complete submission and humility. She accepted even the despicable and lowly calling of a dog, if only Christ would heal her daughter. She humbled herself down that much.

And *that* is the point of this Gospel narrative; *that* is the lesson we are to take away. And *that* was exactly the answer the Lord was deliberately trying to draw out of her, for He knew, of course, that although she was an unbeliever, in His presence she had deep and humble faith. And from this very instant the woman’s daughter was healed; the demon was driven forth from her and she was whole and well once again.

Wonderful indeed was her humble faith, for as a Gentile she did not know the Scriptures of the Old Testament, the prophecies and wisdom of the Prophets, but she *believed* in this Man standing before her, and in this way she typified all of the non-Jews, the Gentiles, who would later be called and gathered into the great and saving sheepfold of the Good Shepherd. At this moment, because of her faith, she indeed obtained salvation.

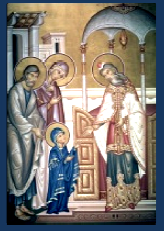
Her repeated beseeching of the Lord to have mercy on her daughter is an example to us, also, of prayer, and how we, too, must be persistent in asking for mercy and all of the things we legitimately need in our lives—our health, welfare, and salvation. Beyond those things, of course, we really need not ask for anything more and must be content. But we are certainly entitled to ask, and to ask with determination and persistence, for the needful things. We must have the same focus and resilience as this Canaanite Woman. Think about it for a moment: she was absolutely and resolutely committed to Jesus Christ.

But in fact, are we? Do we in fact “hang in there” when the going gets rough, and persist in our confidence in God? Or do we give up and mumble and grumble?

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You might say, well I'm weak and I'm unworthy. But do you know what St. John Chrysostom said about that?

He wrote: **"Never mind that you are unworthy. Become worthy by your assiduity."**

Now "assiduity" is a wonderful older and rarely used word in English. It means a person who is diligent, energetic, industrious, persevering, persistent, resolute, and zealous. Therefore it's no wonder that Christ said to her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done unto you as you desire'!"

The conclusion to all this? Simply this: if we wish to receive answers to our prayers, we must have faith and we must be humble *and* we must be "assiduous". And if we are lacking in any one of these, then we must do some soul-searching and correct ourselves, supplying that which is lacking, so that then we, too, like the Woman of Canaan, can hear the Lord saying to us "Great is thy faith! Be it done unto thee according to thy will."

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.