

In Nomine Iesu

Reminiscere, the Second Sunday in Lent 2021 **Childlike faith – Matthew 15:21-28**

“Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.’ But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she cries out after us.’ But He answered and said, ‘I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’ But He answered and said, ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.’ And she said, ‘True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered and said to her, ‘O woman, great is your faith; Let it be to you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour.”

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for whose sake our prayers are answered. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

With his account of the same incident, the Evangelist Mark tells us, Jesus “arose and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. He entered a house and wanted no one to know it, but He could not be hidden.” (Mark 7:24) Jesus was looking for a little bit of rest. But a desperate woman heard Jesus was in the area, found the house, and kept crying out for Him to help her daughter. The disciples begged Jesus to send the Canaanite woman away. They intended her no harm; they only wanted to help their Master.

I

We are not told how long her crying out lasted, but it was long enough that the twelve decided something had to be done. They took Jesus’ silence to mean that He did not want to help her, but she was not taking the hint. There were reasons Jesus might not help this woman’s daughter. Mark tells us she was a Greek, that is, Greek speaking. Worse, she was Canaanite, the very people whose land God had promised to give to Abraham and whom He had commanded Joshua to destroy. Because Israel did not do that, the Canaanites caused Israel many problems from the beginning of their time in the Promised Land. They subverted God’s people with their pagan religious practices and often helped Israel’s enemies. Some of Jesus’ disciples may even have thought that a Canaanite woman’s daughter possessed by a demon was fitting. After all, God Himself threatened to punish all who did harm to Abraham and his descendents.

At first the disciples tried to ignore her, hoping she’d go away. But she kept crying out for help, and wouldn’t leave. So now they came to Jesus thinking something like, “Lord, send her away. It is fine with us that You choose not to help her, but please, isn’t it time to tell her to go away and leave us in peace?”

Jesus’ disciples took His silence to be a refusal to help. We understand their thinking. Don’t we often interpret the silence of God the same way when we pray and ask for help, and receive no quick or clear answer from Him? But you see, the woman saw something different in Jesus’ silence than His own disciples. Desperately worried for her child, the woman thought and acted like a child herself. With childlike logic she thought, “This One whom many call the Messiah has not said, ‘No’, therefore He might say, ‘Yes.’” So she pressed on. All parents are familiar with this childlike logic as soon as their child can put words together into sentences, if not before.

You know how it works. “Can I have this or that?” And you, not wanting to be seen as uncaring to the child’s wide and expectant eyes, hesitate. You don’t want to say no, but you do not want to say yes either. So, you remain silent. The child persists. Silence does not work. The child does not take the hint. The child presses on. And he or she will continue so long until the desperate, tired parent at last says something to get peace, “We’ll see.” An adult will take the hint and stop, but not a child. “When can we see?” Well, you know how this works, unless the parent comes right out and says, “No,” the questions, and pleading will continue.

As long as the parent never gives a clear ‘no,’ the child figures there’s still a chance for ‘yes’ and will keep crying for what they want. Ambiguity, or even silence, is not taken as refusal, it is an invitation for more pleading until a concrete, definite – and quite possibly, loud! - answer is given. The woman had the heart of a child. What is more, somehow she knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah. And this is the chief thing to be noticed here. She knew who He was, and even though she was by birth a daughter of Canaan, by faith she was a daughter of Abraham; and she wanted life for her daughter from Him who alone gives life.

II

The woman refuses to accept Jesus’ silence as an answer, because in the end it is not an answer. Nor is she put off by His first two responses. They too, are not answers to her petition. In the end Jesus commends her for her faith, not only for her persistence, in fact, not primarily for her persistence. He commended her faith primarily for what motivated her to keep asking. It may seem a small point, **but it is everything**. Let us be very clear, Jesus was not saying to her, or us, “If you keep on asking, God will eventually give you **what you want**.” No, He commended the faith that would not allow her to believe God’s silence meant He was deaf to her cries for help. Thus she continued to ask, trusting that He would answer her prayer. He might say, “no”, or perhaps, “not yet,” and the same faith that sparked her continuing persistence would have accepted “no” as His answer as well. But He would have to answer first.

This text gives comfort to Christians because the woman’s situation is well known to us. In our lives it may often seem that the devil, the world and even our own flesh are having their way with us. They seem to be driving us away from God. Even worse, it can seem that God is a willing accomplice, or at best that He is neutral, and not taking sides in the matter. He is silent in the face of our prayers and concerns. And, **here is the point**, like Jesus’ own disciples, **when God is silent, we are tempted to fill His silence with our own answers**; we try and speak for Him. We fill in the blanks. And the answers we come up with are not very comforting.

We start to ask, “Why would God be silent,” and then we look at our lives, and find reasons. And we have no trouble finding them. We know we have brought no end of problems on ourselves. Often, the mess we are in is one that is a result of our own decisions. Or maybe we’ve made a mess for others. We have led others into sins of doubt and unbelief with our words or deeds, or our lack of words or deeds. That God would not help us would only be getting our just desserts from Him, even as many an Israelite might have thought that a Canaanite woman being plagued with such tragedy was only fitting. Dear friends, we have all done things worthy of punishment and rejection by God. We deserve to reap the bitter fruit of disobedience.

Yet even in His silence, God doesn’t ignore us, nor does He despise us, dismiss us, or send us away. Nor is God punishing us for some great sin we’ve done. If that is how He dealt with humanity, why ever did He send His only-begotten Son into the world? Still we tend to think that God’s silence is a result of His judgment against our sins;

but the truth is that for God to punish us for our sin, or ignore us, or be silent toward us would be injustice according to His own standards. God cannot punish us for our sins of thought, word, and deed, because He has already punished His Son for them. Jesus became the troublemaker, the offender. He became sin for us, as the Apostle Paul said. He took each of us to be His own personal sinner, and then stood in our place and took the punishment for our sins, each and every one of them. At His crucifixion, God ignored Him, forsook Him, remained silent, even as He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" God left His own Son to suffer hell so that we would not. But He who suffered, knew that the promise of God who so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son could not be broken, and so spoke His last words, "Father, into Your hands I commend My Spirit."

God's word promises us that we no longer are an offense to God. It encourages us to come to Him with our every request, our every fear.

The Father's beloved Son invites us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven" with our petition. He assures that the Father hears - and answers. But the timetable He follows is not ours. It is His. It is never as if our first prayers were not quite good, pious, or sincere enough this time. If He remains quiet, answering not in our time, but in His, it is a reminder to us of where our help lies. God would have us grow into that childlike faith that says, "So long as I don't hear, 'no,' the answer might be 'yes.' And even if I hear, 'no,' I can be sure that it is the best answer for me. It is the answer given by my loving heavenly Father, who knows all things, and who promises only the best, the eternally best, to happen to His children, whose sins - all of them - have been covered by the righteousness of His only-begotten Son. This gracious God in whom we trust, is powerful, merciful, wise, and loving enough to take even what is my evil and use it for my good and the good of others." For He so loves the world.

+++

We call this Sunday "*Reminiscere*", the Latin word for "Remember." When troubles enter our life, or when we believe that God is being silent, we tend to remember our sins and all the reasons why we deserve nothing from Him. But the Scripture texts for this Sunday tell us that God would have us remember **His tender mercies and loving kindness toward us**. Like the Canaanite woman, God would have us look beyond the troubles that He allows in our life and trust the working of a loving, heavenly Father. God would have us look through all the crosses in our life, and remember the cross of His Son, trusting the love of Him who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, and with Him has promised to **freely give us all things**. Be persuaded, dear children of the heavenly Father, of what is in the heart of God and in the heart of His Son toward you. Be persuaded with the Apostle Paul, that "neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39) Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria