

THE SYROPHENICIAN WOMAN

"Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto Him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Thou Son of David: my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and besought Him, saying, Send her away: for she crieth after us. But He answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then she came and worshipped Him, saying, Lord, help me. But He answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour." Matthew 15:21-28.

The King of Israel has passed beyond the bounds of Israel, driven by the hostility of those who should have been His subjects. The delegates of the priestly party from Jerusalem, who had come down to see into this dangerous enthusiasm which was beginning in Galilee, have made Christ's withdrawal expedient. And He goes northward, if not actually into the territory of Tyre and Sidon, at any rate to the borderland.

The incident of the Syrophenician woman becomes more striking if we suppose that it took place in Gentile ground. At all events, after it, we learn from Mark that He made a considerable circuit, first north, and then east, and so came round to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, where the last paragraph of this section finds Him.

The key to its meaning lies in the contrast between the single cure of the woman's demoniac daughter, obtained after so long imploring, and the spontaneous abundance of the cures wrought with Jesus again which the Jewish sufferers had to do with, even

though it were on the half-Gentilized eastern shore of the lake. The contrast is an illustration of His parable of the crumbs that fell from the table and the plentiful feast that was spread upon it for the children.

The story of the Syrophenician woman naturally falls into four parts, each part marked by the recurrence of the words, "He answered."

FIRST THERE IS THE PITEOUS CRY AND THE ANSWER OF SILENCE.

Mark tells us that Jesus sought concealment in the journey, but distress has quick eyes, and this poor woman found Him. Canaanite as she is, and thus a descendent of the ancient race of Israel's enemies, she has learned to call Him, "the Son of David," **owning His Kingship which His born subjects disowned. She beseeches for that which He delights to give, identifying herself with her poor child's suffering, and asking as for herself His mercy.**

It was a sight to stir pity to see a woman calling aloud in such distress, and that woman a mother, and pleading for a daughter, and that daughter in such an evil plight. In her humility she does not bring her child, nor ask Him to go to her. In her agony, she has nothing to say but to spread her grief before Him, as thinking that He, of whose pity she has heard, needs but to know in order to alleviate, and requires no motives urged to induce Him to help. In her faith she thinks that His power can heal from afar. **What more could the Lord have desired?**

All the more startling, then, is His demeanor. All the conditions which He usually required were present in her, but He, who was wont to meet these with swift and joyful overanswers, has no word to say to this poor, needy, persevering, humble, and faithful suppliant. The fountain seems frozen, from which such streams of blessing were wont to flow. His mercy seems clean gone,

and His compassion to have failed. **A Christ silent to a sufferer's cry is a paradox which contradicts the whole Gospel story,** and which, we may be very sure, no evangelist would have painted, if he had not been painting from the life.

Then secondly, there is the disciples intercession answered by **Christ's statement of the limitations of His mission.** Their petition evidently meant, "Dismiss her by granting her request." They knew in what fashion He was wont to "send away" such suppliants. They seem, then, more pitiful than He is.

"She crieth after us." That "us" shows the cloven foot. They did not like the noise, and they feared it might defeat His purpose of secrecy, and so, by their phrase, "Send her away," they unconsciously betray that what they wanted was not granting the prayer, **but getting rid of the petitioner.**

Perhaps, too, they mean, saying something to her, either tell her that Thou wilt, or that Thou wilt not. Break Thy silence somehow. No doubt, it was intensely disagreeable to have a shrieking woman coming after them, and they were only doing as most of us would have done, and as so many of us do when we give help without one touch of compassion in order to stop some imploring mouth.

Their apparently compassionate, but really selfish, intercession was put aside by the answer, which explains the paradox of His silence. It puts emphasis on two things: **He is subordinate to the Divine will of the Father, and the restrictions imposed thereby on the scope of His beneficent working.** He was obeying the Divine will in confining His ministry to the Jewish people, as we know that He did. Clearly, that restriction was necessary. It was a case of concentration in order to avoid diffusion. The fire must be gathered on the hearth, if it is afterward to warm the chamber.

There must be geographical and national limits to His life, and the Messiah, who comes last in the long series of the kings and prophets, can only be authenticated as the

world's Messiah by being first the Fulfiller to the children of the promises made to the fathers.

The same necessity, which required that revelation should be made through that nation, required that the Climax and Fulfiller of all revelation should limit His earthly ministry to it. This limitation must be regarded as applying only to His own personal ministry. It did not limit His sympathies, nor interfere with His consciousness of being the Saviour and King of the whole world.

He had already spoken the parables which claimed it all for the area of development of His kingdom and in many other ways had given utterance to His consciousness of universal dominion, and His purpose of universal GRACE. **But He knew that there was an order of development in the kingdom, and that at this then stage the surest way to attain the ultimate universality was rigid limitation of it to the chosen people.** This conviction locked His gracious lips against even this poor woman's compassionate cry.

We may well believe that His compassion outran His commission, and that it would have been hard for so much love to be silent in the presence of so much sorrows, if He had not felt the solemn pressure of that Divine necessity which ruled all His life. He was bound by His instructions, and therefore He answered her not a word.

Individual suffering is no reason for transcending the limits of God-appointed functions, and He is absolved from the charge of indifference who refrains from giving help, which He can only give by overleaping the bounds of His activity, which have been set by God the Father.

What we have next, the persistent suppliant answered by a refusal which sounds harsh and hopeless. Christ's former words were probably not heard by the woman, who seems to have been behind the group. She saw that something was being said to Him, and may have gathered from gestures or looks, that His reply was unfavorable. Maybe

there was a short pause in their walk, while they spoke, during which she came nearer.

Now she falls at His feet, and with beautiful shamelessness, she repeats her prayer, but this time with pathetic brevity, uttering but one cry, "Lord help me," i.e., "Lord remember me." **The intenser the feeling the fewer the words.** Heart-felt prayers are short prayers. She does not invoke Him as the Son of David, nor tell her sorrow over again, but flings herself in desperation on His compassion, with the artless and unsupported cry, wrung from her agony, as she sees the hope of help fading away. Like Jacob, in his mysterious struggle, "She wept, and made supplication unto Him."

As it would seem, her distress touched no chord of compassion, and from the lips accustomed to dropping oil and wine into every wound, came words like swords, cold, unfeeling, keen-edged, fitted and meant to lacerate.

The Lord's refusal was a real refusal, founded on the Divine decree, which He as bound to obey. His words to her, harsh as they unquestionably sound, are but another way of putting the limitation on which He had just insisted in His answer to the disciples. He had just finished in his answer to the disciples, the "bread" is the blessing which He, as the sent of God, brings the children who are the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and the dogs, are the Gentile world.

The meaning of the whole is simply the necessary restriction of His personal activity to the chosen nation. It is not meant to wound nor to insult, though, no doubt, it is cast in a form which might have been offensive, and would have repelled a less determined or less sorrowful heart. The form may be partly explained by the intention of trying her earnestness, which, though it is not the sole, or even the principle, is a subordinate reason of our Lord's action.

But it is also to be considered in the light of the woman's quick-witted retort, which drew out of it an inference which we cannot suppose that Christ did not intend. He uses a

diminutive for "dogs" which shows that He is not thinking of the fierce, unclean animals, masterless and starving, that still haunt eastern cities, and deserve their bad character, but of domestic pets, who live with the household, and are near the table. In fact, the woman seized His intention much better than later critics who find "national scorn" in the word, and the fair inference from them is just that which she drew, and which constituted the law of the preaching of the Gospel, "To the Jew first, and also to the Gentiles."

We have this woman's retort, which wrings hope out of apparent discouragement, answered by Christ's joyful granting of her request. Out of His very words she weaves a plea, "Yes, Lord, I am one of the dogs, then I am not an alien, but belong to the household." The Revised Version does justice to her words by reading "for even" instead of "yet." She does not enter a caveat against the analogy, **but accepts it wholly and only asks Him to carry out His own metaphor.** She takes the sword from His hand, and catches on to His own words. She does not ask a place at the table, nor anything taken from those who have a prior claim to more abundant share in His mercies. A crumb is enough for her, which they will never miss.

In other and colder words, she acquiesces in the Divine appointment which limits His mission to Israel, but she recognizes that all nations belong to God's household, and that she and her countrymen have a real, though for the time, inferior, position in it. She pleads that her gain will not be the children's loss, nor the answer to her prayers an infraction of the spirit of His mission.

Perhaps, too, there may be a reference to the fact of His being there on Gentile soil, in her words, "which fall from the children's table." She does not want the bread to be thrown from the table to her. She is not asking Him to transfer His ministry to Gentiles, but here He is. A crumb has fallen, in His brief visit. May she not eat of that?

In this answer faith, humility, perseverance, swift perception of His meaning, and hallowed ingenuity and boldness, are equally

admirable. By admitting that she was a "dog," and pleading her claim on that footing, she shows that she was a "child" and understood the GRACE of God. And therefore, because she has shown herself one of the true household, in the fixedness of her faith, in the meekness of her humility, in the persistence of her prayers, Christ joyfully recognizes that here is a case in which He may pass the line of ordinary limitation, and that, in doing so, He does not exceed His commission.

Such faith is entitled to the fullest share of His gift. She then takes her place alongside the Gentile centurion as the two recipients of commendation from Christ for the greatness of their faith. **It had seemed as if He would give nothing, but He ends with giving all**, putting the key of the storehouse into her hand, and bidding her take, not a crumb, but, "AS THOU WILT."

Her daughter is healed by His power working at a distance. But that was not, we may be sure, the last nor the best of the blessings which she took from the great treasure of which He made her mistress. Nor can we doubt that He rejoiced at the removal of the barrier which damned back His help, as much as she did at the abundance of the stream which reached her at last.

The final verses of our study of this woman give us a striking contrast to this story. Jesus is again on the shores of the lake, after a tour through the Tyrian and Sidonian territory, and then eastwards and southwards, to its eastern bank. There He,

as on several former occasions, seeks seclusion and repose in the hills, which is broken in upon by the crowds. The old excitement and rush of people begin again. And large numbers are "sick, lame, blind, dumb, maimed, and many others are brought." They are cast "down at His feet," in hot haste, with small ceremony, and, as would appear, with little petitioning for His healing power.

But the same GRACE for which the Canaanitish woman had need to plead so hard, now seems to flow almost unasked. She had, as it were, wrung a drop out, not that it gushed abundantly. She had not got her "crumb" without much pleading. These get the bread almost without asking.

It is this contrast of scant and full supplies which the Holy Spirit would have us observe. And He points His meaning plainly enough by that expression, "They glorified the God of Israel," which seems to be Matthew's own, and not His quotation of what the crowd said.

This abundance of miracles witnesses to the pre-eminence of Israel over the Gentile nations, and to the special revelation of Himself which God made to them in His Son. The crowd may have found in it only fuel for narrow national pride and contempt, but it was the Divine method for the founding of the kingdom nonetheless, and these two scenes, set thus side by side, teach the same Truth, that the King of men is first the King of Israel. "To the Jew first and also to the Gentiles."