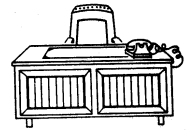


20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 16, 2020



From the Desk of
Fr. Romanus

Dear Parishioners,

This Sunday's gospel is about a Canaanite woman from the district of Tyre and Sidon who was persistent in asking for a miracle for her daughter possessed by a demon. The Canaanites were pagans who practiced idolatry. You may recall that when God called Abraham, he promised to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan. Not only was this woman from Canaan, she was also from the district of Tyre and Sidon, the worst part of Canaan. There were instances where Jesus stated that it would be worst for sinners who refused to repent than it was for Tyre and Sidon (Matt 11:21; Mk 7:27; Lk 10:13).

This background is important for the sake of those who might be troubled by the way this woman was treated. It also helps us understand why Jesus compared the granting of her request to throwing food meant for children to the dogs. You may be shocked that Jesus would say something so mean to this poor woman desperately asking for help. Note that the woman did not take offense at Jesus' remark. She understood why she was being ignored and why she was getting an unfavorable treatment. Nonetheless, meanness to other people is incompatible with Jesus' message of love and tolerance.

This gospel underscores the understanding that Matthew's gospel was aimed primarily at a Jewish audience. In his interaction with this woman, Jesus makes clear that his mission was "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It is likely that Jesus' audience in this passage had a good understanding of the hostile relationship between Jews and Gentiles. There was a long history of hostility based on the brutal defeat of Jews by powerful Gentile armies like the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Being a Jew, Jesus tries in this gospel to identify with his people's history and advance his own credibility among them.

It is possible that Jesus was tough on this woman in order to draw out her faith. As we know, faith was a necessary condition (*conditio sine qua non*) for most of Jesus' miracles. By acting as if disinterested in her request, he may have solicited the expression of her faith. That faith was evident in her response, "even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their master." Jesus acknowledged her faith by stating, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." At that instant her possessed daughter was healed. This Canaanite woman teaches us the need for persistence in prayer.

The story is a lesson for those who are inclined to call on God only in times of need. There are those who do not care about God and some who proudly proclaim their faithlessness. They claim to be too intellectually sophisticated to believe in God and that religion is only for the feeble-minded. When faced with major life crisis, these same people may call out to God for help after other options are exhausted. We hope that they would not get the same response as this woman. Like her, they would have to swallow their pride and proclaim faith in God.

As we live in a different society today, one could argue that Jesus' reference to giving children's food to dogs may have lost some of its punch. Some people love their pets so much that they would have no problem giving them food meant for children. While many children are starving all over the world, some pets feed like kings. We remember the case of the New York millionaire who left several million dollars to her pet dog. There is nothing wrong with taking care of our pets, but we can only imagine how many children that kind of money would have saved from starvation.

Have a great week!

Fr. Romanus