

Reflection for Aug. 5, 2020

Feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. Mary Major

Mt. 15:21-28--the Canaanite Woman

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Do you ever find it difficult to understand why Jesus responds as he does in a particular case? In yesterday's Gospel, from the end of Mt. 14, Jesus enters Gennesaret and is immediately recognized. People flock to him for healing and as many as touch his cloak are healed. No questions asked.

In today's text, it is not so simple. Jesus is in the region of Tyre and Sidon. A woman approaches him. We are told she is a Caananite. She wastes no time in making her need known: "Have pity on me Lord, my daughter is tormented by a demon." But this time, Jesus is silent.

The woman is not silent, and the apostles are annoyed. "Send her away!" This time, Jesus neither sends her away, nor heals the daughter. "I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel" he says. She isn't one of them.

The woman is persistent. This is her daughter and she seems to know that Jesus can help if he chooses to. She persists, "Lord help me!"

Now, we think, he will heal the child. Rather, he counters with: "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." I find myself thinking, is this the Jesus I think of as kind and gentle? But this is a mother, and she is not giving up.

She counters: Please Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the master's table. Now, she has won. Jesus responds, "woman, *great is your faith* ... let it be done for you as you wish."

Jesus praises the woman's faith, but my reflections brought me to focus also on the woman's motivation – her great love for her daughter. She knows Jesus *can* help; she may know that he has helped other non-Jews. It doesn't matter right now that he insults her (maybe that happens to her a lot). She desperately wants her daughter healed. She has come with both great love and great faith.

In the following verses of the Gospel, Jesus is again surrounded by the large crowd. We are told they are lame, blind, deformed and mute. They are placed at Jesus' feet and he cures them.

What do we learn from all of this? Certainly, we see Jesus' power and willingness to heal. But, behind the scenes there is another dynamic, which it seems to me, says something to us about how we pray.

- The Canaanite woman comes with faith, but she is also driven and sustained by love for her daughter.

- Those who gather on the mountainside arrive with the help of friends who care enough about them to carry or lead them to the feet of Jesus.

This repeats in one way or another throughout history. We see the power of prayer, motivated by faith and love ... and patience. Things clearly don't always happen right away or as we would wish. How many years did St. Monica spend in prayer for the conversion of Augustine?

- St. Alphonsus says we should talk to Jesus with familiarity, as to a best friend.
- St. Teresa of Avila told her sisters to pray as they could.
- Jesus said to avoid a babble of words, but rather to simply pray: "Our Father"

What then makes the difference? Does the response to our prayer depend on the strength of our faith? On the power of our love? Or, simply on God?

We also have the prayer of Jesus in the Garden. Jesus desperately wants to avoid the end that awaits him. But we know his prayer: "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will."

- How, then, do we pray for our world filled with virus and violence?
- How do we pray for our country struggling with racism and divisions?
- How do we pray for the people we need to bring before the Lord?

Perhaps it is enough to simply bring the concerns of our hearts and of our world with us into the presence of the Lord for the healing of God's presence and love? I am reminded of a quote from Romans:

"... the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought but the spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will." (Rom. 8:26-27)