

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus is, as we have heard in the last several weeks, a teacher, who spoke in parables. He is the Compassionate One, who healed the sick; He is a miracle worker, who multiplied bread and fish in abundance, who satisfied the hungry. He is a man who sometimes needed to be by Himself to grieve and pray. He is the God-man and not a ghost, who walked on water and saved drowning Peter.

No doubt about it. This is the Jesus that we like to hear about, while the Jesus we hear about in today's Gospel maybe makes us cringe a bit. I mean, what's up with Jesus today? A woman came up to Jesus, crying out for mercy! "*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.*" She's just the kind of needy person we'd expect Jesus to help. But not a word. No compassion; no mercy — so it seemed. Only a deafening silence.

She didn't stop. She kept crying out to Jesus for help. The disciples got involved, rather like they did for the miraculous feeding. Then it was: "*send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves*" (Matt. 14:15). This time it was: "*Send her away, for she is crying out after us.*" It's as if they were saying, "Lord, this is getting embarrassing. Do what she asks, then send her away so she'll leave us alone." Still, nope. Nothing. He dismissed their request with an: "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*"

The woman wasn't done. She kept crying out to Jesus and finally came up to Him, falling at His feet. "*Lord,*" she called Him. Did she know who Jesus was? That He was the Messiah of Israel? This pagan Canaanite woman, a Gentile? She had called Him Lord before, and with the messianic title "*Son of David.*"

"*Lord, help me,*" she pleaded. Still Jesus rebuffed her: "*It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*" It just seems so uncharacteristic of Jesus. We kind of expect harsh treatment with the Pharisees — and indeed, just a bit earlier Jesus had chastised them for their hypocrisy, for thinking they were something for their law keeping while they were breaking "*the commandment of God for the sake of [their] tradition*" and making "*void the word of God*" (Matt. 15:3, 6). Isaiah prophesied of them for their unbelief when he wrote, "*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me*" (Matt. 15:8). But this woman ... ?

To be sure, this woman was a Canaanite, a Gentile, and not a Jew. But does that merit such harsh treatment? Besides Jesus had helped Gentiles before; He had healed the servant of a Roman Centurion ... a Gentile (Matt. 8:5ff).

Actually, this incident brings to my mind another when it seemed as though Jesus spoke harsh words to His own mother: the wedding at Cana, when they ran out of wine at the wedding banquet. Then it was Jesus' mother who asked Him to do

something about it, and again our ears hear a rebuff to His mother. “*Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.*” We often consider these words as unkind or disrespectful. But they weren’t, nor can they be explained by some “social or cultural habits . . . of the time” (Weinrich, *Concordia Commentary: John 1:1 – 7:1*, 314). They were a reminder to Jesus’ mother just why He was sent by His Father, and it wasn’t to save a wedding host from embarrassment; He was sent “*that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:17).

Similarly, in today’s lesson, those words to His mother echo in His reply to the Canaanite woman, although Jesus’ rebuff was threefold this time: first silence, then “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,*” and then “*It’s not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.*” Still, the words were not unkind or cruel. They were not “*a ‘temptation’ which this woman is asked to overcome.*” Rather, “*Jesus [is] simply [asking] the disciples and the woman to accept the divine plan that Jesus must work out his mission among the Jews alone*” (Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 598-9).

Jesus is asking both these women and us to consider why was He sent into the world? Jesus was sent to “*the lost sheep of Israel*” for the sake of the world, that He might redeem the world of its sins. God’s Son entered the world, into human flesh, that when the time was right, He might “*suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed*” (Matt. 16:21). Jesus was sent to “*the lost sheep of Israel*” that by “*their rejection*” the world might be reconciled to the Father. Jesus was sent to the children of Israel that the promise given to Abraham might be fulfilled, that by Israel’s seed would “*all the families of the earth be blessed*” (Gen. 12:3); not just Jews, but Gentiles would be blessed through this “*Deliverer . . . come from Zion*” (Rom. 11:26). Jesus was sent, born of the loins of Judah, that when the Jews broke the commandments, not even they could claim that salvation was by keeping the law, but solely by grace through the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was sent to the disobedient sons of Adam that He might have mercy on all and bring the faithful, whether Jew or Gentile, to His holy mountain and gather them into His house of prayer.

Now in both of these cases, the women took Jesus’ mild rebuke and responded with faith. His mother said to the servants: “*Do whatever he tells you.*” And Jesus performed His first miracle, turning the water into wine. The Canaanite woman acknowledged her status, “*Yes, Lord, I am a dog,*” and yet in faith she responded “*even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*” She understood that any blessing that might come to her now during Jesus’ ministry on earth would be incidental to the ultimate purpose for which He was sent. And she knew that even those crumbs were not really crumbs at all, but the abundance of God’s mercy.

Of course, with this great faith in sight — a faith that understood who Jesus was and confessed it, a humble faith that consented to the Lord’s will, even in the face of her daughter’s hardship: “Yes, Lord. Give me Your crumbs.” — Jesus performed another miracle. He did have compassion and healed the woman’s daughter.

But more than that, we know that what was accomplished by Jesus through the disobedience of the lost sheep of Israel, would soon be proclaimed to Gentiles everywhere — “*Go and make disciples of all nations,*” πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, even the Gentiles, “*baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matt. 28:19). Peter would also come to understand that “*God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*” (Acts. 10:34-5). And Paul reminds us in the Epistle that he was sent out especially as the “*apostle to the Gentiles*” that wild Gentile branches might be grafted onto the Tree, incorporated by baptism into Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).

Therefore, rejoice, dear Gentile saints of God — that’s right, isn’t it? No one here is a descendent of Abraham according to the flesh, are you? Rejoice, for the good news of Jesus is for you, even as it was for the Canaanite woman, for Jesus was born a Son of Abraham and Isaac and Israel, a Son of David, to accomplish salvation through the children of Israel. But this salvation is not for Israel alone. Christ is the World’s Redeemer. And this salvation is not based on the flesh — our “*flesh is no help at all*” — but on a righteousness that comes from faith, and a faith that believes in Him who speaks “*words that ... are spirit and life*” (John 6:63). As St. Paul says, “*the gospel ... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek—[like this Canaanite woman; like you]. For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’*” (Rom. 1:16-7).

That doesn’t mean that the life of faith will be easy — we must endure in this faith to be saved (Matt. 24:13). You, like the Canaanite woman, likely have and no doubt will experience trial and difficulty in life. You may not have a child possessed by a demon, but the assaults of the devil are real. In faith, cry out to Jesus for mercy. Be not deterred if it seems as if your cries are met with silence at first or rebuffs. Endure in the faith and persist in your prayers. Confess Christ and humbly receive His will. Come to His table and receive His grace; they are not mere crumbs. Be strengthened by His body and His blood, the food that endures to eternal life. And at length you will obtain the outcome of your faith — the reason Jesus was sent to the lost sheep of Israel — you will obtain the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:9).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.