

The Syrophenician (Canaanite) woman

Matthew 15 vv.1-21.

Mark 7 vv.1-24

A group of strangers is making its way along one of the roads in the country of Tyre and Sidon, where Elijah has once lived for many months with the widow woman of Zarephath.

These travellers are the Lord Jesus and His disciples.

The followers of Jesus are walking behind their Master with sad, downcast faces. They are disheartened and fearful. It is not going well, it is going wrong. Their Master is no longer safe in His own country. Jesus could scarcely get into Judea, because of the hatred of the pious Pharisees. If He did go, it was always at the risk of His life. For some time it had still been alright in Galilee. Thousands of people there followed the Prophet of Nazareth and were astonished at the signs and wonders which Jesus did. But now it has gone wrong in Galilee too. The multitude has forsaken Him.

Furthermore Pharisees and Scribes from Judea had come again and incensed the Pharisees of Galilee against Jesus.

Thus it was that the Saviour had found it necessary to leave His own country, and now they were wandering about in the land of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus has to find a refuge in a strange land, among the heathens.

So it is quite understandable that the disciples are anxious and nervous. They cannot understand it at all. Everywhere danger threatens, death awaits. They hope that no one will take notice of them. They would rather remain quite unknown there, for if the gentile inhabitants of that land get to know who they are, they could perhaps take them prisoner or kill them.

Matthew 15 vv.22-28.

Mark 7 vv.25-30.

All at once they are startled from their sober thoughts. They all look back, for they are being shouted at.

There is a woman following them, and she it is who calls. Listen, there is that melancholy voice again. Quiet! Just listen.

"Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil."

But, how~~ever~~ does this woman know that it is the Lord Jesus? Who has told her that? ... Who is she anyway?

She is a Canaanite, and therefore a heathen. Some think that she was a widow, living together with her daughter, but we cannot be certain of that. Whatever the case may have been however, this heathen woman had a daughter. That girl was ill though, yes, worse than that she was possessed of a devil. The evil spirit had made itself master of the child. Instead of getting help and support from her daughter, this woman had to watch over her child the whole time.

Oh, how terrible that had been for her. Without doubt she had sought help at first from the gods of her people - that is from idols. The heathen priests of Tyre and Sidon however were unable to help her. Whatever she tried, all seemed in vain. We may well believe that this woman often shed hot tears of sorrow as she saw and experienced the misery of her dear daughter. She had to watch helplessly as her child became a prey of this hellish spirit. Is there no way at all of saving the girl? ...

Certainly in the country of Tyre and Sidon a lot has been said lately about the mighty Prophet of Nazareth. This Canaanite mother has heard these stories too, but of what use is that to her?

Jesus of Nazareth preaches in Galilee, but that district is not part of her fatherland. Galilee is in the land of the Jews.

She hears that Jesus heals the sick and afflicted and cures them of their complaints. She hears that many possessed of devils have been healed and set free by Him in Israel. The evil spirits are forced to give way before the mighty word of this wonder-working Prophet. Oh, she believes these stories. Her heart is filled with deep reverence when she hears that nothing is too wonderful for Jesus.

Among the gentiles too it was common knowledge that there would one day rise up a mighty King over Israel - the Messiah. The Canaanite woman knew this too. And the more she heard about Jesus of Nazareth, the more certain became the conviction in her heart that this Prophet is the Messiah. He must be the long expected Messiah, the King of Israel, the Son of David.

But oh, the Messiah is the Prince of the Jews and she does not belong

to that nation. She is one of the heathen Canaanites, one of the old enemies of the people of Israel. No, she has no right to this Prince.

One day she hears that the mighty Prophet has come into her country. Now, she can bear it no longer. She is going to Him. She is not worthy that He should help her, but she resolves to seek Him notwithstanding.

There she leaves her home and her daughter and hurries to the place where Jesus is walking. That was a difficult path for her to tread. She doubts not Jesus' power, oh no, she believes quite surely that Jesus can help her daughter, but she does not know whether Jesus will help her.

It is a difficult path, and yet it is just as though she is drawn towards Him. An urgency has sprung up in her soul, which drives her on.

At last she has found Him, and now she cries for mercy.

"Thou Son of David!" ... those are not spoken as just so many words, but she believes it with all her soul.

Thus she calls after Jesus, as He is walking the roads of that country.

However hard she cries however, Jesus acts just as though He does not hear her. He answers her not a word, but just walks on. Jesus lets her call and it seems He will not help her.

She does not despair though, but she perseveres. She really is not worthy of His help. She keeps on begging.

The disciples become upset. If it goes on like this, it will soon be known who they are, and they do so want to stay unrecognised.

"Master," they say to the Lord Jesus, "send her away; for she crieth after us."

They hope that Jesus will help this woman quickly, and then her crying will stop at least, and the attention of others will not be attracted to them.

The Lord Jesus answers them however: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." It is as though He says: "No, I am sent to My own people. I will help them; I will give them everything they ask for, but what has this gentile woman to do with Me? Nothing, surely?"

It seems then, that He will not listen to the poor Mother. He does not even listen to her. He walks on without vouchsafing her one word.

Look, there they enter a house at last. Which house this was, we do not

know. Mark writes simply that He entered into an house. Nothing more is said, but it could well have been a kind of inn.

The disciples probably think that they have now got rid of this troublesome woman.

They give a sigh of relief. But the next moment they realise that the Canaanite woman has also entered. She has followed the little group of travellers.

Although the Lord Jesus has thus far not listened to her, she has still continued calling upon Him, and when she notices that Jesus enters a house, she follows Him inside. She will do anything for the good of her beloved daughter, who is so afflicted. Certainly, the Lord has taken not the slightest notice of her continual crying until now, but neither has He sent her away. Thus far Jesus has said nothing to her, so ...

With a throbbing heart she approaches this stranger, of whom she can say by faith, that He is the Messiah, the Son of David. She falls upon her knees before Jesus and worships Him. In supplication with her eyes full of tears, she lifts up her hands to Him and asks: "Lord, help me."

Oh, she cannot go away. If she goes home then all hope of helping her child is ~~xxx~~ lost. If Jesus does not do it, then nobody else can, for sure.

The Lord Jesus looks upon her and says: "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." *

Now, what does the Lord Jesus mean by that? ... Why does He say that?

You must understand that the Jews used to call the gentiles contemptuously - "dogs". A dog in the land of Israel was an unclean beast. Thus the Lord Jesus here compares this woman to a dog. But there is no contempt in His voice, for He wants to try this heathen woman's faith. Jesus means: "Woman, you are a heathen, and I am come for the people of Israel, for My people, for the Jews. You are not among that race."

(*Information only - the original word may mean "puppy".)

And what answer does the Canaanite woman give? ... Does she get angry, because Jesus compares her with a dog? ... Does she go away crushed, thinking that it is beyond hope with her? ...

No! No, anger fills her soul. What Jesus has said is true. He is quite correct in what He says. She is but a dog, a heathen ... and yet.

"Truth, Lord" says she, her voice trembling with emotion. "Yea, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs."

She means by that: "I acknowledge that I am but a dog, but when children sit at table, then it sometimes happens that they drop a few crumbs on the floor, and those crumbs are ~~xx~~ licked up by the dogs. Lord, give me but a crumb of mercy. I need no more; I ask no more. One crumb of mercy is sufficient to save my unhappy child."

What an example for the Jews. The Lord Jesus had told the Jews that He was that bread which came down from heaven. But the Israelites had spurned that heavenly bread. The Jews had gone away with a shrug of their shoulders. They had despised that Divine bread. They rejected the Messiah and did not believe in Him. They ~~xx~~ were annoyed with Him.

And this Canaanite woman asks not for a whole loaf, but she begs just a crumb of that heavenly bread.

Can you see that this woman is not at all proud? This woman comes as one undeserving, as one who has no right to anything at all.

Then Jesus looks upon her and answers kindly: "O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt."

Jesus wonders at the great faith which is displayed in this Canaanite woman. He did not find such great faith in Israel.

Look, there she leaves the house in which Jesus is staying. Her face glows with happiness. At that word of Jesus she had turned and left. She believes the word which Jesus spake to her. She does not demand that Jesus should go with her. Oh no, that word is sufficient.

In our thoughts we will accompany her. A little later she steps within her home - and then? ... Her daughter is still laid upon the bed. So, was it not true, what Jesus had said? Indeed it was true, for it says in the

Bible (Mark 7): "And when she was come to her house, she found the devil gone out, and her daughter laid upon the bed."

The girl was restored. The devil had had to let the young maid loose. Perhaps some of you will ask: "Why then was she still in bed?"

Oh, what took place in that home no-one knows. Perhaps at the last moment the devil had tried to tear her and to kill her. The devil is a murderer. She may indeed have been exhausted ... but she was healed. The faith of that troubled mother was not put to shame.

Through the unbelief of the Jews, Jesus had been obliged to leave Galilee, and the Jews had to lose the blessings of the Messiah's works.

And this woman, of heathen origin, was helped.

Shall you, who have so often been warned, and who are so well acquainted with the Gospel, be lost for ever through the indifference and unbelief which is in your hearts? And shall some heathen boy or girl in a far-flung country be converted by the Lord through the means of missionaries? ...

Oh children, let this story be a serious warning for you. Do not despise the means of grace, for it could even happen that the Bible, that indispensable Word of God, be taken from our homes, that churches and chapels be closed, so that we could no more go up to the Lord's house. Never neglect purposely, without sufficient good reason, the services of the Lord, but ask God to bless the preaching of His word to your heart. How wonderful that would be. Do you sometimes ask for that as you get ready on Sundays to go to God's house? Or do you just go out of habit, because your parents say you must?
