

Meditations: Wednesday of the Eighteenth Week of Ordinary Time

Some reflections that can assist our prayer during the 18th week of Ordinary Time.

- Insistence of the Canaanite woman
- Jesus' apparent coldness
- When God seems to change his mind

WHILE Jesus was on his way to the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman approached Him

and cried out: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon” (*Mt* 15:22). Our Lord’s first reaction is striking: “He did not answer her a word” (*Mt* 15:23). The apostles, surprised, urged him to send the woman away so that she would stop bothering them. Our Lord replied: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (*Mt* 15:24).

The question seemed settled. But the woman’s determination led her to place herself before Jesus, almost blocking his way: she knelt before Him and exclaimed: “Lord, help me!” (*Mt* 15:25). We might expect that her gesture, marked by a moving insistence, would change Jesus’ mind. Instead, our Lord responded with another disconcerting image: “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (*Mt* 15:26). But the Canaanite woman refused to give up in the face of this new

refusal, and she responded by giving a new twist to the image He had used: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (*Mt* 15:27).

Amazed at this bold act of faith and love, Jesus finally grants the Canaanite woman her request: “Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire” (*Mt* 15:28). His silence, his apparent coldness, led the woman to reaffirm her conviction that without our Lord she could do nothing. Jesus is sometimes silent, letting us think that He isn’t interested in us, that He “doesn’t hear us; that we are being deluded, that all we hear is the monologue of our own voice.”^[1] But He does this so that, like the Canaanite woman, we will turn to him more insistently, and our faith will gradually be purified.

WHY did Jesus act like this towards the Canaanite woman? Why did he

treat her – to human eyes – with such initial coldness? St. Augustine, in response to this question, remarked: “Christ seemed indifferent to her request, not because He refused to grant her mercy, but in order to enkindle her desire.”^[2] In essence, this is an attitude that perhaps we also adopt when someone asks us for an important favor. “Good things come to those who wait,” popular wisdom tells us. We think that if something is really important, the other person will insist a bit more until they get what they want. Otherwise, their request may be overlooked.

Jesus wanted to show us how greatly that woman longed for her daughter’s healing. His apparent indifference was intended to make the Canaanite woman show her faith in a clear and bold way. She asks even when her insistence seems inappropriate; she persists even

though she considers herself unworthy; and she perseveres until she finally obtains what she wants. “We often see that our Lord does not immediately grant us what we ask for,” the holy Curé of Ars said. “He does this so that we may desire it more ardently, or better appreciate its value. Such a delay is not a refusal but a test that disposes us to receive more abundantly what we ask for.”^[3]

Seeing the tenacity of that woman, Jesus exclaimed: “Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” (*Mt* 15:28). We could even say that our Lord wanted her to increase her desire so that, in the end, the miracle would happen according to what she wanted. If her desire had been less, perhaps the miracle would have been less. “Jesus points to this humble woman as a model of unwavering faith. Her persistence in beseeching Christ’s intervention is incentive for us not to become

discouraged, not to despair when we are burdened by life's difficult trials. The Lord does not turn away in the face of our needs and, if at times he seems insensitive to our requests for help, it is in order to put to the test and strengthen our faith.”^[4] —

THE CANAANITE woman apparently managed to change Jesus' plans. It seems that our Lord did not intend to perform any miracle while on his way to Tyre and Sidon, and even less so for someone not from Israel. He had been sent to announce salvation first of all to the people of his Father God. But the woman's insistence moved Christ to change his mind. This surprising dynamic is, in fact, something that also happens in other parts of Scripture. It occurs, for example, when Abraham tries to intercede for Sodom (cf. *Gen* 18:22-33), and when Moses asks for mercy for the Israelites who had committed idolatry (cf. *Ex* 32:11-14).

It also happens when Mary, at the wedding in Cana, gets Jesus to anticipate his hour and turn water into wine for the celebration (cf. *Jn* 2: 1-11). These changes show us that the plans of divine providence also take into account our own freedom and actions. Jesus is sensitive to our requests and listens to us with greater understanding than we could have ever hoped for.

With regard to our Lord's change of attitude, something similar at times can happen to us. We have a clear plan in mind and, unexpectedly, a person we love has a pressing need. Or it may also happen that we have a very clear opinion on a topic, and a family member or a colleague thinks the opposite. In either case, we may have the tendency to protect our space and time at all costs, or to impose our own viewpoint. Our Lord's way of acting shows us the priority that persons have, especially

when they are in need, over our own plans. And “this openness of the heart is a source of joy, since ‘it is more blessed to give than to receive’ (Acts 20:35). We do not live better when we flee, hide, refuse to share, stop giving and lock ourselves up in own comforts.”^[5] We can ask Mary to intercede for us so that we may learn how to look with the tenderness of her Son Jesus at all the persons who pass through our lives.

^[1] St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 304.

^[2] St. Augustine, *Sermo* 77, 1: PL 38, 483.

^[3] St. John Mary Vianney, *Sermon on Prayer*.

^[4] Francis, Angelus, 20 August 2017.

^[5] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 272.

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