

O WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH! - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Matthew 15,21-28

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

When we read the Gospels, it is always necessary to distinguish what the evangelist wants to convey to us, using literary figurative images that are not always immediately understandable, as in the case of this passage, of Matthew's gospel, chapter 15, verses 21-28, the episode disconcerting of Jesus' rejection of a woman in distress over the illness of her own daughter.

What follows, which we will now examine, is not so much an event, but a teaching that Matthew gives to the disciples of Jesus, who are reluctant to what? Reluctant to understand God's universal love for humanity. There is no privileged people, there is no "us first, the others after", but God's love is for everyone. Jesus had tried to announce it, encountering much resistance, already in chapter 8, 10 of this gospel, after the episode of the centurion of Capernaum, which Jesus praises for his faith. Jesus had said: *"Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."* - therefore Jesus praises a gentile – the gentiles were considered mankind's horror for their mentality *"..I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,.."* but what is even worse *"..while the sons of the Kingdom.."* - those who thought they had the privilege of having best places at this banquet – *"..will be thrown into the outer darkness."* So Jesus announces that the love of God will also be manifested to the gentiles and meets great resistance from the disciples who do not want to know. So this passage is an invitation to overcome this prejudice; let's see.

"And Jesus went away from there..." Jesus had to escape after the discussion he had had on religious traditions and he goes to the land of the gentiles - to *".. the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman..."* that is a Phoenician. They are those peoples who, according to the book of Deuteronomy, must be doomed to extermination, therefore people despised, who have no right other than to be subjected and dominated. *"..from that region came out and was crying, Have mercy on me,..."* in the Gospels asking for mercy from the Lord belongs to people who do not know Jesus. A person who has known Jesus never turns to him asking for mercy, only, in this case, this woman who does not know Jesus, or the blind. *"O Lord, Son of David..."* why the son of David? Son, it is not so much the one who was born, but the one who resembles the father in behavior, he was the expectation of the traditional messiah, the messiah who, like King David,

through violence and power, would conquer the kingdom of Israel and would dominate and subdue all gentiles. This is the messiah, the son of David. But Jesus is not the son of David, Jesus is the son of God, he does not come to subdue with violence, but he comes to offer everyone the love of the Father.

"...my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word." Here if we take it as a current event, this attitude of Jesus seems strange. Why does Jesus not respond to the woman? Because the woman turned to David's son and Jesus is not David's son, that's why he doesn't answer her. Jesus wants to ansie the woman, the disciples must overcome this religious prejudice; so he doesn't even say a word to her.

"And his disciples came and begged him,..." do not listen to her, send her away, they are same words that were used in the episode of sharing the loaves, when without showing any solidarity with the crowd, they want to send them away. *"Send her away, for she is crying out after us."*but *"He answered,.."* - to the disciples, precisely, to make them understand and to help them overcome this prejudice-. *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* here is the son of David, the kingdom of Israel, but Jesus instead came to bring, he who is the son of God, the kingdom of God.

"But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." already David's son has disappeared; it is a progress of the woman's faith and, at the same time, the understanding of the disciples. But Jesus insists *"And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."* - sons are the elite, those that have the right. *"dogs"* was a derogatory expression with which gentiles were indicated. And here is the growth in the faith of the woman and at the same time the understanding on the part of the disciples: *"She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* Jesus wants to respond to a prejudice that is always very current: in the face of situations of emergency there are those who rule with the slogan *"first us and then the others"*. We also see this in actuality; faced with these problems of these refugees, these immigrants, faced with serious problems such as housing, work, health there is the imperative *"first us and then if there is also the others"*. Well the woman understands: no, all at the same time, maybe even the crumbs. Well, Jesus understood the faith of the woman and, at the same time, the growth in understanding on the part of the disciples and this does not prepare for the crumbs, Jesus will not give the crumbs. Jesus prepares his disciples for the second sharing of the loaves, and this time, in the gentile land, so not the crumbs. So what Jesus wants us to understand is that there is no privilege - *first us and then the others* - but all at the same time and with abundance. If there is this, one is free from prejudice.

In fact at the conclusion of the reading : *"Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! "* while Jesus reproaches the disciples for the lack of faith it is to the gentiles that Jesus praises for their faith, *"Be it done for you as you desire."* *And her daughter was healed instantly."* But how was she healed? Jesus did not perform any action on this woman, he does not cast out the devil, it is the great faith of the woman who cast out the devil, who is the figure of religious prejudice that discriminates against people and that is what his disciples have in mind.

