

XX ORDINARY TIME – August 17th, 2014

OH WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH! – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Mt 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.

Jesus intends to announce the universal love of the Father. Not only universal for the proportionality (everywhere), but for the quality of this love (for all), but He encounters lot of resistance. He encounters it in His people, in the disciples and even in the pagans who had accustomed themselves to the idea of the predominance of Israel.

So, Jesus, already at chapter 8 of Matthew's Gospel, announces that in the king's banquet the bread that had been refused by the Jews, will become the food for the pagans. And Jesus says: "They will come from the east and the west", that is all the pagan population, ".. and they will take your place".

Then Jesus in Matthew's Gospel chapter 15 tackles the important question of the pure and the impure. Tackling it from the point of alimentation, but it was the base that distinguished the pure people from the pagans, that were impure. And Jesus, after having contradicted the Book of Leviticus that bases itself on this distinction, had to flee abroad because He had said that it is not what enters into the mouth that makes one impure, but what comes out!

After this Jesus must flee abroad. Here the evangelist presents us the meeting with the Canaanite woman. Let's read chapter 15, 21 of Matthew 's Gospel. "*And Jesus went away from there..*" therefore after fleeing from the land of Israel he entered the pagan land, "*..and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman*". The Canaanites were Phoenicians and they were a

population that in the book of Deuteronomy (ch.7) they were doomed to be exterminated. Therefore it is a pagan population, despised and overpowered by Israel.

"...from that region came out and was crying, «Have mercy on me»". It is the *kyrie eleison* that will enter in the liturgy of the church. Well, the expression "have mercy" in the Gospels is a cry reserved for those that do not know Jesus. Those that do not know Jesus, that do not know who He is, they turn to Him with "have mercy". When one knows Jesus, when one knows the Father, "have mercy" or "take pity" are not used anymore. Because one has already experience His fullness.

And she calls "*«O Lord, Son of David »"*, as the blind men that we have seen in this Gospel and that after return - the two blind men that turn to Jesus calling Him son of David. But Jesus is not the son of David! Son of David means the messiah, the warrior messiah that with violence will start the kingdom of Israel and suppress in the pagan population.

The reason for the woman's request is that "*«.. my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word »"* Why did Jesus not respond at the woman's request? Because she had asked the son of David and Jesus is not the son of David, Jesus is the son of God. This is why He did not reply. Keep in mind that this phrase is not so much a fact of current events, but a catechesis for the Christian community that are still making resistance in approaching the pagans.

"And his disciples came and begged him,.." the disciples say to Jesus the same phrase that they used in the division of the loaves and fishes "send the crowd away". So "*«saying, Send her away, for she is crying out after us. !»"*

Therefore the disciples do not tolerate the nearness of the pagans and ask the Lord for help. "*He answered,....."* To whom does He rely? He replies to the disciples that are of the same mentality. "*«I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel»."*

This is the messiah, son of David, that has come for the house of Israel to start the kingdom and oppress the pagans. "*But she came and knelt before him, saying, «Lord, help me. »"* It is already a progress. While at first she addressed Jesus as the son of David, now she refers to Him as Lord, but still asks for help. Therefore she must still advance a step to understand the fullness of God's love.

"And he answered,.." He answers always as son of David, "*«It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.»"* The dogs are not strays, but domestic dogs that live in the house. Well then Jesus, according to this indication, distinguishes between those that have the right, the sons of Israel, and the dogs, a disdainful term - dogs were an impure animal -that indicated the pagans.

Jesus, through this reply, is preparing the disciples for what they do not want, a sharing of bread also with the pagans. Jesus had shared the bread with the population of Israel and now wants to bring the disciples to share bread with the pagans, but they won't think of it, as the pagans are considered like dogs, inferior and impure beings.

Therefore in the woman's growing faith, the evangelist wants to educate the growing faith of the disciples, but we know that it will be easier for Jesus to convince a pagan than His own disciples. And the woman's reply is "«Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table»."

The woman understands that compassion and love go further than racial, ethnic and religion divisions. "«O woman, great is your faith! »" Jesus does not praise the Israelis, the Jews for their faith, but always the pagans. He had praised the centurion and now praises the pagan woman. "«*Be it done for you as you desire.* » *And her daughter was healed instantly*".

Jesus did no action, He did not send away the demon. The woman's faith sent away the demon, figure of the religious prejudice that discriminates people. Therefore, in this passage the evangelist wants to educate the Christian community to open themselves to the pagans and to help them understand that there is no need to dominate the pagans as the traditional messiah of the son of David, but they are to serve as the novelty of the messiah of the son of God.