

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 reading the gospels, it is necessary to distinguish what the evangelist wants to convey from what he says, using literary genres, figurative images that are not always understandable, as in the case of this passage in Matthew 15,21-28. The disconcerting episode of Jesus' refusal to an anguished woman for her daughter's illness. In this case the evangelist does not say directly an unpleasant notice to the person concerned, but lets it be known indirectly. That which follows, that we now examine, is not so much a chronicle, but a teaching that Matthew gives to Jesus' disciples, that are reluctant to what? Reluctant to understand God's universal love for all humanity. There is no privileged people, there is no first us then the others, but there is God's love for all. Jesus had tried to announce this, encountering much resistance, already in chapter 8 of this gospel, after the episode of the centurion at Capernaum, that Jesus praised for his faith. Jesus had said *"Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."* So, Jesus praises a gentile, human horrors for the mentality of the time, *"I tell you, many will come from east and west, " meaning the gentiles " and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven,.." but what is more serious *"..while the sons of the kingdom.." those that thought to be privileged, to have the best places at table in this banquet *"..will be thrown into the outer darkness."* (Matthew 8,10- 12) So Jesus announces that God's love will manifest itself also to the gentiles and will meet with great resistance from the disciples, that 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 flee after the discussion he had on the religious traditions and he went to the land of the gentiles, *"..and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman..."* a Phoenician. They are the population, according to the Book of Deuteronomy, that must be thrown to death, therefore a despised people, without any rights, only to be dominated. *"...from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me,.."* in the gospels to ask the Lord for mercy are the people that do not know Jesus or are blind. *"O Lord, Son of David;.."* who was the son of David? Son, not born of the father, but he who is like the father in conduct. The traditional Messiah was waited for, a Messiah that like King David, through violence and power would have conquered the Kingdom of Israel and dominated the gentile population. This is the Messiah, the son of David. But Jesus is not the son of David, Jesus is the son of God, he has not come to dominate with violence, but to offer to all God's love.*

"..my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word." This attitude of Jesus is strange. Why does he not answer her? Because she has spoken to the son of David, and Jesus is not the son of David, this is why he does not answer. Jesus wants to answer her, but at the same time wants the disciples to overcome this religious prejudice, so he does not utter a word.

*"..his disciples came and begged him,.." not to content her, but to send her away. It is the same expression used in the episode of the division of the loaves, when the disciples seeing the hungry crowd, wanted to send them away. *"Send her away, for she is crying out after us."* But *"He answered,.."* to his disciples 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, while Jesus had come to bring, he who is the son of God, the kingdom of God.

*"But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'" David's son has already disappeared, it is progress in the faith of the woman and at the same time in the understanding of the disciples. Jesus insists "It is not right to take the children's bread.. " the children are the elite, those that have the rights, *"..and throw it to the dogs."* dogs was a derogatory expression which indicated the gentile population. And here the growth of the woman's faith, and at the same time, the understanding on the part of the disciples: *"..yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* Jesus wants to answer to the prejudice that is always present. In the face of situations of emergency, there are those who come up with the slogan: first us and then the others. We see it today with the problem of the refugees, facing serious problems such as home, work, and health, there is the imperative: first us then if there are others. Well the woman understands: no, at the same time, maybe even the crumbs, Jesus does not give crumbs. Jesus prepares his disciples for the second division of the loaves and this time in the land of the gentiles therefore not crumbs. So that which Jesus wants to make understood is that there is no privilege, first us and then the others, but everyone at the same time with abundance. If there is this, prejudice does not exist.*

The reading concludes : *"Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith!"* while Jesus will reproach the disciples for the lack of faith, it is to the gentiles that he praises for the faith. *"Be it done for you as you desire."* And her daughter was healed instantly." But how was she cured? Jesus had done no action over this woman, he had not banished the demon, that is the figure of the religious prejudice that discriminates against people, and that is what their disciples have in mind.