

HUMILITY

The acknowledgement of our ineptitude and our total dependency on God is the foundation of the virtue of humility. Humility is extraordinarily important. St. James instructs us: “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas 4:6; see Ps 138:6; Prov 3:34). Similar thoughts are expressed in other biblical passages. In Proverbs 15:25, we read: “The Lord tears down the house of the proud” (Prov 15:25). In the following chapter in Proverbs this idea is reinforced: “Every one who is arrogant is an abomination to the Lord” (Prov 16:5). Finally, in Jeremiah God is quoted as proclaiming: “Behold, I am against you, O proud one, says the Lord God of hosts” (Jer 50:31). God resists the proud because if he did otherwise he would be supporting the fundamental falsehood at the root of pride. Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite women gives us a wonderful lesson in humility.

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 cried, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed 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 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 fair 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 (Mt 15:21-28).

In this passage St. Matthew recalls a touching incident that is a powerful lesson in humility. A pagan, a Canaanite woman, a non-Jew, a *goy*, screams out to Jesus with the urgent plea, *Kyrie, eleison* – “Lord, have mercy on me”, then adds, “my daughter is severely possessed by a demon” (15:22). Jesus responds with ominous silence!

When the apostles ask Jesus to send her away because she kept crying after them, he replied impersonally: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). Then she knelt before Jesus pleading, “Lord, help me” (15:25). Jesus answered in words that seem degrading, and out of character: “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (15:26). The Greek word, *kunarion*, rendered in our text as “dogs,” refers to a little house dog. In order to better grasp this scene, put yourself in the story. How would you feel if someone implied that your little girl was a worthless pagan dog?

However, notice the remarkable response of this amazingly humble woman. She agrees with Jesus’ assessment without defensiveness while continuing her plea. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (15:27). She fully accepts the reality of their situation. She and her daughter were not in covenant with God as part of his chosen people. Earlier she identified Jesus as the “Son of David,” (15:24) thereby expressing her faith in Jesus as the Jewish messiah. Therefore, she and her daughter are aptly called little dogs in relationship to the creator of heaven and earth. She

will gladly accept a role for herself and her daughter as a house pet in the palace of the King of Kings. She will be delighted if they can eat the crumbs from his table.

When I reflect on the response of this surprising woman I think of our little dog, Georgia. Georgia came to us unexpectedly one day with her head down and her tail wagging. She was so docile and humble that she captured every heart in the family. This is how Jesus responds when he is approached with humility.

Jesus' exclamation "O" only occurs five times in all four Gospels. They always come from the mouth of Jesus. In one instance Jesus gives a mild rebuke to the disciples on the way to Emmaus: "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe" (Lk 14:25). On three other occasions they punctuate strong condemnations (Mt 17:17; Mk 9:19; Lk 9:41). However, in the case of this Canaanite woman "O" is exclusively used to introduce Jesus' admiration. "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done [*fiat* in Latin] for you as you desire" (15:28). Two thousand years later we remember her as the woman of great faith and admirable humility.

Further insight into Jesus' admiration is gained by reflecting on Jesus' use of the word, "woman". Jesus twice identified his own mother as "woman," first at Cana when he began his public assault on the kingdom of Satan, and finally on Calvary where he consummated his victory. By so doing he identified his mother with the "woman" of Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12:1-2, 4-5,17 whose seed will crush the serpent's head. Jesus' address of the Canaanite mother as "woman" connects her with Mary, the prophecy of Genesis and the revelation of the Apocalypse. This may seem surprising, even a stretch, until one recalls another familiar incident that St. Matthew narrated earlier.

Matthew reports that someone told Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, asking to speak with you." But he said in reply to the one who told him, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mt 12:47-50). Humble submission matters the most to Jesus, not mere biology. Therefore the humble surrender of this pagan woman to the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5; 16:26) incorporated her into Jesus' covenant family. She was no longer a dog eating the scraps from his table. She is now the Father's daughter who is invited to dine at the wedding banquet of the Lamb.

How do we view ourselves? Are we someone of importance? Do we crave approval and recognition? Or do we admit that we are "little dogs" who God has elevated to the awesome destiny of being his sons and daughters, a vocation that we could never deserve.

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