

### THE SYRO-PHENICIAN WOMAN.

“Then Jesus went out thence, and withdrew into the parts of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanitish woman came out from those borders, and cried, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, Thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and besought Him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. But He answered and said, I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But she came and worshipped Him, saying, Lord, help me. And He answered and said, It is not meet to take the children’s bread and cast it to the dogs. But she said, Yea, Lord: for even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it done unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was healed from that hour.”—*Matt. xv. 21-28.*

MANY of us, I dare say, read this story with a certain discomfort; we have sometimes almost wished that it were not in the four Gospels. We have the feeling that there is something in it inconsistent with the graciousness of Christ. The woman rather than Christ attracts our sympathy; she attracts it by the first words she speaks. She has come to ask our Lord to relieve her daughter from one of the most terrible of calamities: but she says, “Have mercy upon *me*”; her child’s sufferings are her own. And then she is a stranger, a foreigner, a heathen. She knows with what scorn the Jews regard her race; but in the passion of her love for her child she has crossed the frontier of her own country, and she has come among the people who despise her and recoil from her. Surely our Lord will be compassionate; He will pity the distress of the mother; He will show more than His usual kindness and consideration to the foreigner. But instead of this, He first refuses to speak to her at all; then, when His disciples, who are annoyed by the persistence of the woman, ask Him to cure the child and send her away, He says that He “was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” At last, when the poor woman forces herself into His presence and falls at His feet, He answers, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread and cast it to the dogs.” Surely the whole

story gives us a very different impression of our Lord from that which we receive from everything else that the Evangelists tell us about Him. It is not easy to understand at first sight how it was that to Luther the story had a special charm. And yet he seems to have delighted in it. He found in it a strong support of faith.

Perhaps, however, a moment's consideration may enable us to discover why Luther was drawn to it so strongly. To him, as to many of us, there are times when God seems to refuse all answer to our prayers. We ask and do not receive: we seek and do not find. It looks as though He were treating us roughly. When we hope, and confidently hope, for relief from trouble, He does not even speak graciously: instead of the trouble being removed from us, even consolation is denied. Yes, but—says Luther—see what faith achieves. At last the woman receives not only what she asked for, but words which have given her immortal honour: "O woman, great is thy faith; be it done unto thee even as thou wilt." But while a robust man like Luther may find this in the story, and while there is very substantial and most animating truth in this conception of it, it seems to require some further explanation. All came right at last; but did not our Lord treat the poor woman rather hardly?

### I.

It is our Lord's silence to the woman, in the first instance, and what He said when at last He spoke to her, that occasion our difficulty. But perhaps I ought also to refer to what He said to the disciples.

There is no reason to suppose that they felt any compassion for this foreigner—this heathen. She was disturbing them with her loud entreaties for help. They wanted to get rid of her. "Send her away, for she crieth after us." That was hardly the temper in which to offer a prayer that

was likely to be answered. It was a prayer which expressed impatience with the poor woman, and something like resentment against her. And so it was met with the discouraging words in which our Lord declared that He was not sent to heathen people, but to the house of Israel.

During the three years of His ministry, it is plain that He was under this restraint: His own appeal was to the race which had received exceptional revelations, and which, for many centuries, had been under exceptional discipline to prepare it for His coming. The fact is apparent that our Lord's personal ministry was limited to the Jewish nation: there is very much in His teaching which shows that His larger purpose was to seek and to find the sheep of God's flock that were not of the Jewish fold; but His own immediate work was among the children of the promise. This fact, I say, is apparent, and there is no difficulty in discovering the reasons for it. His work, like ours, had its limits. My principal work lies here among the people of this city, among the people of this country. I listen to accounts of the religious and moral condition of the people of India and China, and it is my duty to do what I can *here* to send them the Christian Gospel; but it is no part of my duty to go to China or India. Other men to whom the vocation comes must do that. And there are limits and restraints upon every man's work. No one can do everything that it is desirable to get done. No one can preach the Christian gospel to everybody in every part of the world. It was the same with Christ during His earthly ministry: "I am not sent," said our Lord, "but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel"; and to that the disciples had nothing to reply. You may regard the words, if you like, as a challenge to them. Did *they* take any larger view of His ministry? Were they anxious as yet that His goodness and grace should reach the heathen nations? Had they understood what He had said at times about the wider

purposes of His love? I can imagine that if they had met the challenge and had answered that this poor woman, too, was one of God's creatures and could not be excluded from God's pity, He would have heard them with great joy, and the honour which He gave to the woman would have been given to them. But they said nothing.

## II.

Now let us turn to the way in which He met the distress and the appeal of the woman herself.

First, He was silent. The story gives me the impression that He was thinking of those limitations of His ministry about which I have just spoken. Should He break through them? His heart was touched: was He free to yield to the impulse of compassion? The reasons which restrained His ministry to the Jewish people were strong: was this a case in which He might disregard them? He had not crossed the frontier and gone among the heathen: might He listen to the cry of the heathen woman who had come to Him? The case, however, was not like that of the centurion's servant at Capernaum. The centurion, no doubt, was a Gentile; but he had built a synagogue for the Jews, and must have had faith in the true God even if he was not formally a Proselyte; and the elders—the Jewish authorities—came and asked our Lord to work the miracle.

There were no Jewish elders appealing to Him for this poor heathen: even His disciples, who asked Him to cure her daughter, wanted only to be relieved of the annoyance she was giving them by her cries. His heart was moved: was the case one in which He might go beyond the usual limits of His ministry? He was silent. He would not dismiss her at once, nor would He answer at once.

The delay may have been occasioned by another reason. There were limitations which restrained His ministry to the Jewish people, but the limitations might be passed

if sufficient reason was given for passing them. Such a reason might be found in the vigour of the woman's faith in Him. All mere external arrangements and methods must give way to the higher laws and ends of the Divine kingdom. It was an excellent rule to rest on the Sabbath : but the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath ; and, therefore, if it was a question of healing a sick man on the Sabbath day, the law of Sabbath rest was set aside. There were strong reasons why our Lord's ministry should be limited to the Jews : but if a heathen showed real and vigorous faith in Him, the limits must be broken through. By our Lord's silence He gave the woman her chance. When He healed her daughter, He asserted the great law that all distinctions between Jew and Gentile, however strong may have been the reasons for them, are but of secondary importance, and are merely temporary, and are cancelled by the power of faith. The woman's faith was a decisive force ; it was an adequate ground for disregarding the limits by which our Lord's ministry was confined to the Jews. *Our* faith may sometimes be the reason which allows God to give us what He would not give in the absence of faith.

But I think that there was another reason why He was silent ; and this third reason, for which I am indebted to Dr. Edersheim, gives a wholly different character to what He said to her afterwards.

The woman called Him the " Son of David " : what did that mean on her lips ? It was the expression of her belief that He was the Messiah who was to come to the Jews, and she knew the kind of Messiah they were expecting. He was to be a King who would raise the Jewish nation to a greatness surpassing that of imperial Rome,—who would give to the Jews wealth, splendour, and all earthly glory,—who would make them the masters of the world. She was a heathen ; as a Syro-Phœnician, she belonged to

a race which the Jews regarded with special hatred and contempt. For her and her countrymen, according to the common expectation, the coming of the Jewish Messiah would bring only a change of masters; they would be the servants and slaves of the Jews, instead of being the subjects of the Romans; Jerusalem, instead of Rome, would rule them. She shared, no doubt, the traditional popular conceptions of what the Jewish Messiah was to be, and of what was to be the destiny of her own people when He set up His kingdom. What she had heard of Jesus of Nazareth made her hope that, perhaps, He would be gracious enough to cure her daughter; but that she and other heathen people were to be at all the better for the new power and supremacy that were coming to the Jews, did not enter her thoughts.

Christ descends to her own ground that He may raise her from it. It is as if He had said, "You call Me the Son of David, and ask Me to cure your daughter, but what part have you in the Son of David? If I am nothing more, why do you come to Me? You suppose that I am about to give to the Jews all the riches and glory of this world, and that you, as a heathen, have nothing to hope for in My kingdom. That is what you mean by calling Me the Son of David. You really renounce your part in Me when you call Me by that name. And if your thoughts about Me are true, I have nothing for you: 'It is not meet to take the children's bread and throw it unto the dogs.'"

Christ gives a vivid expression of the woman's conception of herself and her people in relation to that Jewish kingdom which she supposes He had come to establish. But there is a touch of infinite beauty and graciousness in the expression, which it is easy for us to miss. The word He uses for "dogs" is not the word which was used for the wild creatures which go about in troops in Eastern cities, and which were regarded by the Jews with great disgust. It is

the word for "little dogs," living in the house and with the family, and lying under the table at meals. The woman springs to it. Even the little dogs under the master's table are fed with pieces of the children's loaf. They are not outside. They, too, have a place in the family. If Christ puts it so, then she and her people have a place, though a humble one, in the house of the Master of all. The children may be fed first; but they, too, are to be remembered and blessed. Christ gave her a better place in the house than she hoped for; indeed, she supposed that she had no place at all. To have told her at once what He told the woman of Samaria—that Jerusalem had lost its sanctity, or was about to lose it—might not have been intelligible to her. He told her enough to give joyous vigour to her faith. She was in the same house as the children; she, too, might hope for a blessing.

### III.

There are two considerations suggested by the story that it may be worth our while to think of:—

1. We should be in no haste to say that God has refused to listen to our prayers. Why the answer does not reach us at once, or apparently reach us at once, we may be unable to imagine. In the case of the Syro-Phœnician woman, the answer may have been delayed by the limitations which restrained the ministry of our Lord to the Jewish race. In our case, the answer may be delayed by the settled methods of the Divine action, in the goodness and wisdom of which it becomes us to have unhesitating faith. But in our case, as in hers, the answer may be delayed in order that we may be brought to truer thoughts concerning God and our relations to Him; and as our whole life rests upon our grasping the substantial truth of these relations, delay in securing a particular blessing may well be accepted if it is the means by which we are brought nearer to a right state of mind in relation to God. While

the particular gift is withheld, God is preparing us much larger proofs of His goodness.

2. It is no proof of the strength of our faith that we see that the answers to our prayers come at once; it is no proof of the weakness of our faith that the answers are for a time withheld. Indeed, I suppose that God often listens first to those whose faith in Him is weakest. He will not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax. There are Christian people whose faith is so weak that it would bear no strain: if God did not give some answer to their prayers at once, their faith would perish, and they would cease to pray altogether. The great things, no doubt, come in answer to great faith; but answers are given at once to prayers for inferior blessings in order to keep faith alive.

But where faith is strong enough to endure the discipline, answers to prayer may be withheld for a long time; answers in the form in which they are desired may be withheld altogether. And so when good people tell me, as they do sometimes, that God has answered their prayers wonderfully for many small things, I do not at once suppose that their faith is unusually vigorous; I am rather inclined to think that as yet it is so weak that it requires constant supports, and supports of a visible kind. As it grows stronger these will become unnecessary. And when they say that they pray for great things and the answer does not come, I do not at once conclude that their faith is at fault, or that they are asking amiss; it may be so, but it may also be that their faith has the element of endurance in it. The rough winds which lay the wheat on the ground and destroy frail flowers make the oak more robust, and its strength is proved by its victory over them.

And so the delays which would ruin a weak faith perfect a strong faith; and when the grace, long withheld but persistently sought, is conferred at last, there comes with it, as there came to this poor woman, the joyous approbation of God.

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