

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

When we read a book, watch a movie, listen to someone, we have the ability to isolate what pleases us or what we don't like. By doing so, sometimes we miss the point of what was written, seen, or heard. We just keep the part that struck a chord in us, either good or bad. We might even hear or read ideas that were not the author's intent. I first became aware of this when I was in my Junior year of High School. I was studying French Literature. I had to write lots of commentaries about poems. More than once I could not help but think that probably the writer would be very surprised about the content of my papers, and maybe even upset about how I interpreted their poetry. We all read and hear things with our own cultural and sociological biases, and sometimes we hear things that were not said in the first place.

I thought again about this ability of ours to be so focused on some details that we can't see the big picture anymore when I read and studied this episode of the Canaanite woman. Most of the commentaries I found confirmed my own first reaction. It was all about one sentence from Jesus to the woman, verse 26 which reads "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Why was Jesus so rude with this woman? How did he dare to compare her to a dog? From then on, some people are arguing about Jesus' own cultural limitations, about the poor consideration the Jews had for the Gentiles. Others are trying to limit the rudeness of Jesus' words by saying that he was only quoting a well-known proverb of the time, or that the word for "dog" was in fact the familiar name used to designate a pet. I have even heard people saying that even though Jesus did heal the woman's daughter it was too little, too late. Really? Scholars are divided about all these interpretations. And is that really important? Is that the point of the story told by Matthew?

Let's look again at the whole story. It's a beautiful and powerful distance healing miracle. Who is going to tell the woman that Jesus' actions were too little, too late? Because, even if it is not written, we know very well now she felt after this encounter. It's easy to imagine her amazement, her overwhelming joy, her outpouring thankfulness when she saw with her eyes that her daughter had been healed. Then she knew without the shadow of a doubt that she had met the Jewish Messiah and that he had heard her plea for help. This is what matters in this story. This is why this story is Good News to us today. Our Lord is a Lord who listens to our prayers. Our Lord is the One who heals us, from the inside out. Our Lord is always compassionate, even if we are not really sure that He is listening to us.

The healing of this woman's daughter is the first time Jesus was performing a miracle outside of Jewish territory. And this is Good News to us too. Somehow this healing of a Gentile person in Gentile territory is a sign that one day Jesus' message would be for all peoples, all nations, no matter their ethnicity. Up until this point, Jesus was pretty clear that he came to gather the lost sheep of Israel. It's why his first reaction to the disciples' demand was: "I was sent only to the lost sheep the house of Israel." (v.24) It's a direct echo to the instructions Jesus gave to the Twelve when he first sent them on a mission: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (10:5-6)

It's interesting to realize that just before this episode Jesus' conflict with scribes and Pharisees was increasing. It's even more interesting to know that the Greek word ἀνεχώρησεν (anechōrēsen) translated in our Bible by "he went away", or he withdrew, is used in Matthew to indicate a move to a safe place. In other words, Jesus withdrew from Jewish territory to find some peace and quietness before pursuing his mission of preaching the Good News of God. But, even in this Gentile territory his fame had spread, and a woman needed his help.

When we read this story we might think that all happened in a couple of minutes. The woman came to Jesus, Jesus stayed silent, the disciples got annoyed, and eventually Jesus talked with the woman and healed her daughter. When we pause, and think about what is going on, suddenly appears a new dimension in this story: time. Time is passing as the woman is shouting to Jesus asking Him to heal her daughter. But Jesus stays silent. Time is passing when she is still shouting as Jesus and his disciples are walking. But Jesus stays silent. I don't know how long it took before the disciples got really annoyed by the shouting of the woman and by Jesus' astounding silence. But time is passing. And Jesus stays silent. This silence is important, in this silence something is happening, in Jesus, and in the woman.

Jesus' silence is not neglect, nor contempt. He is listening. He is thinking. He is pondering what he could do or not. But at the same time his silence allows the woman to express her needs and to change her mind too. Her plea to Jesus went from "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David," to a simple and honest "Help me." Jesus' silence transformed her prayer, from mercy to help. Her prayer was transformed and heard because of Jesus' silence. Her physical gesture is also an indication of the change that occurred, she was now kneeling at Jesus' feet. Once again, the Greek has a deeper meaning, we could have translated: she worshipped him. We can see the trust, the absolute trust of this Gentile woman in this man she never encountered before. We can see her deep faith which will be the basis of Jesus' healing of her daughter.

I like the way Eugene Peterson explains the role of silence during the encounter between the woman and Jesus: "There's a silence that deepens relationships. It's a reflective silence. It's a silence that absorbs all that is being said by the other person. Intimacy is awakened in such silence. Experiencing such silence, I discover that I've been listened to, that my words have been taken seriously, that I'm being responded to as a unique person -- too important a person to be just turned off with a phrase." Later Peterson goes on to say, "Jesus did not answer this woman's first request. He did not reject it; he was just silent. And the silence was purgative." It was purgative because Jesus' silence led her to ask from the bottom of her heart a simple but honest "help me."

Jesus was first sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but ultimately he was sent to all people from all nations, fulfilling so many prophecies of the prophets for whom God would be God of all nations. Fulfilling the prophecy we heard today from Isaiah: "Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them beside those already gathered."

So, what does this story teach us today? First that nobody is too far from God, and that God listens to all those who turn to Him for help, no matter who they are and where they are from. This is Good News for us, and, I hope, it is an encouragement to pray faithfully to the Lord, knowing that He listens always. Second, the silence of Jesus is a reminder that God's silence to our prayers is not because what we ask falls in deaf ears. Sometimes, very often, God's

silence is a silence that invites us to persevere in our prayer; a silence that invites us to listen too. God's silence is not a refusal or a rebuke, but, to use Peterson's expression, God's silence is "purgative," helping us, inviting us, to come closer to God, and to put our trust in God. God's silence allows us to think about our own demands, requests and needs. God's silence helps us to refine our prayer, and one day to say with confidence: Thy will be done.

I leave the last words to Peterson again: "We're puzzled initially both by the silence and the speech of Christ. Neither is what we expect of him. But that's because we don't know him very well. For when he is silent, he is still listening. When he rebukes, he is still loving. He is listening to you now as you pray, even though he may be silent. And he is loving you now, even though his answer may not be what you expected."

For when he is silent, he is still listening. When he rebukes, he is still loving. He is listening to you now as you pray, even though he may be silent. And he is loving you now, even though his answer may not be what you expected. Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. Help me. Amen!