

In today's Gospel reading Matthew conveys to us at least two things. One is a hint, a preview of what is to come. That is, the eventual proclamation of the Gospel to the whole world. God has a specific plan for the salvation of the world, that comes in steps in a certain order. The good news of the Kingdom of Heaven come to the Jews first, then the Gentiles, then the rest of the world. By the end of Matthew's Gospel, the Risen Christ commands his apostles to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The other thing Matthew brings to our attention is a very important point about faith. There are times when God will act in ways toward us that may seem at the time harsh or cold. He will do this. And it can be very painful, confusing, even frightening. But although His method may seem that way, He has a very good result mind that he *will* bring about.

It is interesting to see what Jesus does in this scene. Last week, Jesus walked on the water to his apostles in the boat. But then they finally land at Gennesaret and a crowd of people come to Jesus for healing. He gets into an argument with some Pharisees over loyalty. The Pharisees want to be loyal to their

traditions, but Jesus teaches that everyone must be loyal to God alone. Then Jesus teaches the apostles about how it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of it.

And then, Jesus leaves that place and begins to head toward the region of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman comes to meet him. Now the thing we may overlook is the significance of these place names in the story. Many times in Scripture we read of cities, towns and regions that add meaning to the story. And if we don't know anything about those places, the meaning escapes us. Matthew doesn't explain this because he expects his original audience to get the significance right away.

Suppose I told you that I was going to Indianapolis next Memorial Day weekend. Without me saying another word, you might have a pretty good idea of why I was going to that city, especially at that time. I'm going there to see the Indianapolis 500 race. Or if I were to say that I am planning a trip to Washington, D.C. I don't need to explain to you what's there or why I might be going. And Matthew doesn't put in the text the significance of Jesus going to Tyre and Sidon and a Canaanite woman coming to meet him.

These were places where the Gentiles lived. In this scene the apostles are silent about it. But it's likely they were wondering why Jesus would be going there. Back in chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel Jesus sent the twelve to go out into the surrounding country and preach the good news of the Kingdom. And he gave them these instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And here, Jesus is leading the apostles right into Gentile territory, the very thing he commanded them not to do.

And a Canannite woman, a Gentile, comes to Jesus. And notice what she first says to him: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." "Lord" and "Son of David" were titles for Jesus that were developed much later, after the Church was well established. Presumably, neither Jesus nor any of the apostles had yet gone into Gentile territory, nor had the Church been established. All of that happened after the first Easter. And here is this Gentile woman showing great faith in Jesus and using language she couldn't possibly have known about yet.

Matthew is telling us here that as God incarnate, Jesus knows that eventually His kingdom will spread to the Gentiles

and to the ends of the earth. As God incarnate Jesus knows the outcome of whatever is happening in the present. God sees the beginning and the end at once. In this case, what we are being shown is that God has a plan for salvation. One thing the entire Bible is very clear about is that God is orderly. God has built an order into his creation. And God's plan for salvation is likewise ordered. Jesus' ministry begins with the "lost sheep of Israel" but then extends beyond Israel eventually to the ends of the earth. God knows the outcome.

The grand principles of God's orderliness and knowing the outcome in advance are applied in the specific case of the Canaanite woman. This is the second thing Matthew wants us to see, a very important point about the nature of faith. This Gentile woman comes to Jesus and kneels before him and calls him Lord. It could hardly be accidental that Matthew places this account so soon after Peter's episode in the boat. There, Jesus called Peter a man "of little faith". Here, this woman represents the proper way to approach Jesus: recognizing Him as the Lord, and kneeling before him.

Jesus knows the outcome of this meeting before the apostles do. The Canaanite woman comes to Jesus with a plea

for help. She wants Jesus to heal her daughter who is being tormented by a demon. No answer. Jesus' silence is not intended to be harsh or cold even though it may seem that way. Jesus takes this opportunity to reveal a truth. He knows how this is going to turn out. His silence does two things. It heightens the apostles' awareness in the situation and it increases the woman's resolve to get the help she seeks from her Lord. The apostles at first tell Jesus he should send her away because she's being a pest. And Jesus repeats his mission: he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. And so the apostles are drawn in even more.

And the Canaanite woman's resolve is heightened even more. She kneels before Jesus – the posture of true faith – and pleads for his help. Again Jesus puts her off. His cryptic remark about throwing the children's food to the dogs does not deter the woman. She comes right back with words that reveal the greatness of her faith.

And there with the apostles looking on, Jesus pronounces that her faith is great. And He instantly grants her request. It seems fair to say that the apostles were not expecting that outcome.

But what they have just witnessed, and what we ourselves have witnessed, is that faith means recognizing Jesus as Lord and approaching Him in the appropriate way. And sometimes God may not answer us right away when we come to Him for help. But His silence does not mean He's ignoring us. To the contrary, God keeps silent sometimes in order to make our faith grow within us. Or His answer to our prayers may seem like He's putting us off. If we persist in our prayers to God, that persistence will deepen and strengthen our faith. And then He will grant our requests. He knows the outcome.

The wind and the rain beating against the stalk of a plant make it stronger so it will stand the way it needs to. Resistance makes our muscles grow stronger. If our souls never meet with any resistance, they won't grow stronger. Many times we get that resistance in everyday life in this world. Sometimes God has to provide that resistance.

In our spiritual lives, there may be times when it seems like God responds to our prayers for help with silence. And it may feel like He is distant from us. But the reality is that at these moments He is very close, shaping our souls and increasing our faith.

I had a professor at seminary who said that each of us is still alive, we're still here on earth because God still has something for us. There is something else yet for us to learn or to see. We may not be able to see it, but the Lord does. He knows the outcome. He will grant our requests for help. And very likely in ways that far exceed what we imagined.

But just imagine what it must feel like to have the Lord Himself say to you that your faith is great. Amen.