

Lent 2, 2021

“O woman great is thy faith”. (St. Matthew 15.28)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

To subdue something means to master it, or to overcome it. This was the Gospel theme last week: Jesus subdued the devil. He subdued Satan's appeals to give into the flesh. In reflecting on what happened in that wilderness experience, the parable of the sower comes to mind. The seed that fell on the wayside was plucked up by the birds, just like when the devil comes and snatches God's Word from people's hearts. The seed that fell on the rocky soil sprung up but quickly withered because it lacked moisture. It had no root – just like people who receive God's Word and believe for a while, only to fall away from the Faith when temptation comes. The seed that fell in the thorn patch is a picture of hearts which allow their commitment to Christ to be choked out with other things such as cares, riches and the pleasures of life. In each case, the person does not subdue the temptation. They give up or give into the attack.

In the 70's and 80's George Momberg, a Dutch-born wrestler made quite a name for himself, taking on the persona, 'Killer Karl Krupp'. Instead of trunks like everybody else, he wore tights that covered his legs and looped over his shoulders. And, he had a submission hold that, as kids, we loved to imitate – 'the claw'. When it was applied, victims would flail their arms and kick their legs momentarily; but the match inevitably would be over. Using the claw, Krupp subdued his competitors.

Okay but how do we subdue our spiritual enemies? This is really a key question throughout the season of Lent. As the season that brings us to the Cross where the Son of God was humiliated, tortured and killed as our Substitute, Lent calls us to be honest about our sins and brokenness. Christ was wounded for our Transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed". (Isaiah 53.5) Without a doubt, we are in a spiritual battle and subject to daily attacks and temptations. So what can we do? How can we subdue our enemy?

The woman in this morning's Gospel shows us exactly what to do, and it is not rocket-science. This lady came humbly to Jesus and she persisted in her prayer.

The Gospel says that she cried out to Jesus, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil". BUT, He did not answer her, not even a word. That gave the disciples the idea to ask Jesus to send the woman away. He responded by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". In other words, He was pointing out that she was a Gentile from Canaan. Nevertheless, that did not deter her. She came closer and knelt before Him and asked, "Lord, help me". Still, Jesus put her off, saying, "It is not right to take the children's bread and cast it to dogs". 'Dogs' -- that was how the Jews felt about the Gentiles. She hung in. "Truth, Lord; yet the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table". Then (and finally), Jesus exclaimed, "O woman great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt". And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

It was a powerful encounter which the Lord Jesus used as a teaching point for the disciples. Even Gentiles were included in God's plan of salvation. Like the Jews, they only needed to put their trust in the Son of God. Faith, not ceremony, is what God requires. By coming in faith, with persistence, this woman subdued the devil.

In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul wrote, "In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one." That is exactly what the woman of Canaan did: she continued her advance toward the Lord behind the shield of faith. What Paul had in mind was a large, half-cylinder shield used by Roman infantrymen, called a scuta. It was 3 ½ feet high and 2 ½ feet wide and could be used in front of the body, or overhead, to protect from enemy arrows and swords. In all circumstances, Paul told the Ephesians, take the shield of faith. When temptations of doubt and fear, convenience and pleasure, fly at us like arrows, it is by faith that we shall subdue them.

By 'faith' I mean 'faith in God the Everlasting Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost'; 'faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God'. That said, let's dig deeper on the meaning of faith. The Greek root of 'faith' (pistis) is 'peitho' which means 'persuasion'; so 'faith' means 'Divine persuasion'. For example, there is the image of Jesus knocking at the door of our hearts. He comes to request entrance; to persuade. There is also the image of Christ as the sower, broadcasting seed which is the Word of God. Faith is always a gift from God, and never something that can be produced by people. That is what St. Paul told the Christians in

Ephesus: "By grace you have been saved through faith. And that is not your own doing it is the gift of God." (2.8) So, faith comes to us from God. He approaches us. He knocks and speaks and invites. He kindles the spark in our hearts to trust. He shines the light of His truth. Faith is always the *work of God* and involves hearing His voice. As St. Paul said, "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God". (Romans 10.17)

We are talking about a mystery here. The God Almighty has revealed Himself; His will; and His Truth to us through His Word -- His Incarnate in Jesus Christ, and His Word written in the Bible. This revealing is for our benefit. He wants us to know Him -- His love and peace and hope. He wants us to be saved. He wants to have us with Himself in perfect communion and glory forever. He wants to persuade us about the necessity of accepting His mercy and truth in Christ.

This is the brink of mystery: invisibly His Word is sent forth -- His persuasive Word. Silently it travels beyond our human sense of hearing, deep into our hearts. It is the Divine Word; the eternal and holy Word. It is full of the new life; of grace and truth. It is life-giving and transformative. Upon hearing it, not only our ears but our hearts must respond, to accept or to reject Him.

The woman of Canaan had accepted. She was persuaded completely and therefore persisted in approaching Jesus. The arrows were flying all around her -- the arrows of temptation -- uncertainty, doubt, fear. "Send her away," the disciples urged Jesus after He answered her not a word. Still she advanced and subdued the enemy, using the shield of faith.

Like this dear woman, the Lord has permitted us to be tested over the past year. By permitting the corona virus, He took an initiative of faith so that we might be persuaded about our need for Him. He did not permit this pandemic to put us off or to crush us; but rather, to draw us closer. Every day of this trial, He has been with us, but as our heavenly Father, He yearns to show us His way. Therefore, as one scholar says, "The Lord continuously *births faith* in the yielded believer so they can know what He prefers; that is, so we might be *persuaded of His perfect will*."

The fact that faith -- this Divine persuasion -- is God's gift does not mean that we can be wet noodles. St. Paul told Timothy, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am

convinced is in you as well. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” “Fan (the Divine spark of faith) into flame”. This is what the woman of Canaan did! She persisted against all odds. She was a Gentile. The disciples wanted her gone; and three times Jesus put her off. Still, she took the shield of faith and subdued the temptation to flee.

In 1614, Nicholas Herman was born into a poor family in eastern France. His parents were peasants and finding enough to eat was a challenge. So, as a young man, he joined the army, which guaranteed him meals and a small stipend. At the age of 16, during the Thirty Years War, he saw a leafless tree in the middle of a battlefield. Realizing that the tree would be in full leaf and flower in a few months, he saw the tree as a symbol of God's ability to transform the human heart. At 21, he was wounded and rendered lame for the rest of his life. The ghastly experience of war led him to examine his religious up-bringing and the gift of faith. Eventually, at 26, he entered a Carmelite monastery in Paris and took the name ‘Lawrence of the Resurrection’. He best known for his little book, The Practice of the Presence of God.

Following his death, a brief word about his character was written, with quotations from Brother Lawrence, including this one on faith. “It is not enough to know God as theory from what we read in books, or feel some fleeting affection for Him; our faith must be alive, and we must make it so, and by its means lift ourselves beyond all these passing emotions to worship the Father and Jesus Christ in all their Divine Perfection”.

This is the challenge before us now: we must take the shield of faith and advance. We must fan into the flame the gift that God has given us. Our faith must be alive, and we must make it so. The thing is, we have a will; and through the Holy Spirit, we have received the gift of new life. We have been washed in the precious Blood of Christ and adopted as God’s own daughters and sons. Now, it is for us to believe the faith we have received. To cherish it; to guard it; to take it and to use it for our soul’s health. God has not abandoned us; on the contrary, He is calling His Church to steady up. He wants us to join ourselves to Him and to one another in the strength of His will, with His Word, and to advance on the enemy and subdue him. “We beseech you, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus,” wrote St. Paul

in today's Epistle, "that as you have received of us how you ought to walk and to please God, so you would abound more and more."

And now unto God Almighty: the father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all majesty, dominion, power, honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.