

Matthew 15: 21-28

21 And leaving Gennesareth, Jesus withdrew unto the regions of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Now, behold, a Canaanite woman, having come from these borders, began to cry out: "Take pity on me, master, son of David, for my daughter is in the grip of evil impulses". 23 But he did not answer a word. After approaching him, his disciples insisted on saying, "Get rid of her, because she is behind us defeating us." 24 But Jesus answered them, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 However, the woman began to bow down against him with her words, "Master, help me". 26 Jesus replied, "It is wrong to take the children's bread and throw it to the puppies." 27 She continued, "It is true, master, for even puppies only eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table". 28 Then Jesus said to her, "My dear lady, how great is your faith! Let whatever you want happen!". And her daughter was healed at that very moment.

Gospel commentary - Homily

How far do our borders go?

I am often fascinated and intimidated by those who are sure of themselves in their understanding of the world, for whom the good is clearly on the right, and the evil clearly on the left.

One of them was recently responding to an interview. He is an English writer who has produced two biographies of the former Prime Minister of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher. Brexit? The English have a clear idea where they will go outside the European Union. Why did he become Catholic when he was Anglican, and his wife remained so? Because the Anglican Church decided to ordain women priests in 1992, a decision which he considers sectarian and anti-ecumenical towards the Catholic Church. Pope Francis? He is not as intellectually strong as Benedict XVI or John Paul II. An example, the encyclical *Laudato Si* presents arguments badly put together. And this intellectual weakness also has an impact on the organization, which spreads confusing.

Here is the example of a man where everything must be white and black, without gray area. It is representative of so many others, and it stands out from those who continually ask themselves a thousand and one questions, for whom the truth belongs to the world of shadows. It is with this setting that we will tackle the Gospel of this day.

The story of a Canaanite woman, with a daughter who seems to be struggling with a mental illness, explained by demonic possession, is a moment in a long Gospel sequence. This sequence begins with Jesus feeding the crowd on the shore of Lake Galilee, in which 5,000 people participate and of which there are 12 baskets of leftover bread, and ends with a second feeding of the crowd in Greek territory, the Decapolis, in which 4,000 people participate and of which there are 7 baskets of leftover bread.

For those who know how to decode symbols, the meaning is clear. All of Jesus' gestures evoke the Eucharist. The first Eucharist involves the Jewish compatriots, where they are five thousand, because the five loaves have been multiplied a thousand times (a myriad designates the infinite), and the 12 baskets of leftover bread allows to feed the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel; the second Eucharist with the four cardinal points, multiplied a thousand times, involves the non-Jews or pagans of this earth, and the 7 baskets which remain recall the 7 Greeks at the service of the tables in the Acts of the Apostles (wrongly called "deacons"), responsible for non-Jews.

How did a Christian community, first with only Jewish people, come to integrate strangers into the Eucharist? Two passages in this sequence explain it: first, a word from Jesus on the pure and the unclean (a stranger is unclean for a Jew) affirming that nothing can make a person unclean, and that only what comes out of heart and mouth may be unclean; then the story about the Canaanite. Let's take a closer look.

Let us first recall that the evangelist Matthew is a Jew and, if we are to believe the biblical scholars, having written his Gospel in Antioch, a very conservative Judeo-Christian community. It is from this community that people, called Judaizers, came out who wanted to impose compliance with all Jewish laws and customs on those who were baptized, including circumcision, food prescriptions, cult rites, and attacked the work of Saint Paul who advocated great freedom and for whom faith in Christ was enough.

What is Matthew's position? It is in this Canaanite story. She is pagan, or if you like, an infidel. However, this pagan is able to recognize the messianity of Jesus, since she calls him as "Son of David". But her prayer is unsuccessful before the intervention of the disciples; don't forget, since Jesus' death, they have become his mediators, a role in a structured community to which Matthew is very keen. It is here that he evokes the objection of several Judeo-Christians from his community for whom the mission of Jesus, and of his disciples, was intended for the Israelites, and not for the pagans. What is his answer? Yes, the Jews have priority in the teaching of Jesus, but the crumbs that remain from this teaching are enough to nourish the Gentiles and lead them to recognize in Jesus their master or Lord. This is what he puts in the mouth of the Canaanite. And his conclusion is clear with the astonishment of Jesus: How great is your faith! Therefore, how can we refuse baptism to people of such faith (baptism is represented by the daughter back on her feet), and subsequently, how can we refuse the Eucharist (see the second feeding of the crowd).

The portrait that Matthew paints of Jesus, and thereby of the Christian community, is that of a man who had a clear idea of his mission, limited to the Israelites only. And now an event, the meeting of a pagan woman, turns everything upside down. Two reactions are possible: to confine oneself to one's convictions, or to open oneself to the event, to accept it as a new question. According to Matthew, Jesus chose the second option and accepted it as the word of God, and this is what Matthew offers to his community. Of course, the second option is destabilizing, and forces us to redesign our world. The integration of the pagans into the first Christian communities represented a colossal challenge, and many Jewish Christians no longer recognized themselves in this new landscape. But that allowed us today to be disciples of Jesus too.

On another but much larger scale, we are faced with the encounter of migrants who knock on our doors. This is our new Canaanite. And we can say: our first responsibility is towards ours, not towards foreigners. We may prefer, like our Englishman, that things remain in black and white, and that we control our own destiny alone to avoid confusion. But what are we to answer if some people have greater faith in the destiny of our country than ourselves?

Integration is of course a colossal challenge, and sorting out the good and the bad is not easy. On the other hand, what if this would allow the healing of our children, as was the case of the Canaanite's daughter, what if this would give our children a better and richer country, as the integration of non-Jews gave a better and richer Christian community. But does our faith go so far?