

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 17, 2014

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You will remember last week's Gospel. Peter asked Jesus to allow him to walk on water. And the Lord said, "Come." For a splendid moment Peter *did* walk on water. Of course it is easier to recognize Christ working in Peter this way 2000 years ago than when it happens to us today! Remember, Peter nearly drowned! In similar circumstances a man of lesser faith might very well conclude God has abandoned him. When we don't get our way, even when the stakes are not so high as they were for Peter, we easily comes to the conclusion God has abandoned us. But it is a *false* conclusion. Abandoning souls is not a divine character trait! Abandoning is rather part of what *we* do. It is part of the character inclination of fallen human nature.

In today's Gospel there is a *different* set of circumstances. But it is the same great Physician of Souls Who brings another soul to the point of acknowledging devotion and dependence upon Christ. The political, social, and religious conditions were all wrong for the Syro-Phoenician woman to get what she wanted. (And she really was asking nothing for herself, but healing for her daughter.) But the conditions were no accident. We do not know just how the Lord Jesus set up the situation that led to this exchange. (Think back to last week's Gospel: we do not know to what extent the Lord set up the conditions that led to Peter's request to walk on water.) But the Blessed Lord began by giving this woman the definite impression He wanted to be left alone. She got the silent treatment. Then Jesus remarked to His disciples *in her hearing* He only deals with Jews. Finally He called her a dog, which was a great insult in first-century Palestine, even if it seems tame by today's crude invective.

The woman did not take NO for an answer! And it is important to remember on other occasions Our Lord said this is *exactly* how we are to treat our Heavenly Father. We are to clamor to Him with loving insistence. The chairman of the board may be treated with deference during the business day. But his child doesn't think in those terms. The chairman of the board is his father. And the child gives no thought to wrinkling the press in his father's Savile Row suit and evening newspaper in order to crawl up into his daddy's lap and get some attention before

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dinner. The Syro-Phoenician woman is behaving in a way the Lord commends. Jesus must have been smiling inside.

The Lord invariably used situations such as miracle healings for one purpose. It was to bring souls closer to Him. Think of Jesus coming to console Mary and Martha of Bethany after the death of their brother Lazarus. Jesus said to Martha, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” That is a strange form of condolence, unless you just happen to *be* the Resurrection and the Life, and the One Who defeats death! Lazarus would die again. That is why he came forth from the tomb wearing grave clothes. But he and his sisters came to a closer faith and trust in Christ precisely because of the illness and death Lazarus underwent.

In the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman the thing really important about her was not that she believed the Lord could do what she wanted done, nor even that she was insistent in her petition, but that she really knew, deep down, Who Christ is. She knew when very few others knew at the time. And Jesus wanted her to bring this faith to the surface and declare it in words.

Now we understand all the apparent rudeness and aloofness on the part of the Lord. It was actually the working of Christ’s *compassion*. It brought this woman opportunity to express what was in her heart. Christ knew faith was in her before she knew it herself. Just as He knew what was in Peter even when no one else did.

The woman’s daughter would be healed. But that is *incidental* to the real story. The daughter would probably go on to live a typical life of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain when possible and eventually dying. *But her mother had come to faith in Christ*. Just imagine! Her declaration of faith was so eloquent it became part of our Holy Scriptures! Her faith, and she who had it, would live forever.