

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Tenth Sunday after Trinity  
August 20, 2017

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In last Sunday's Gospel at Mass Peter asked the Lord Jesus to allow him to walk on water. And the Lord said, "Come." Peter *did* walk on water. But then, realizing fully his surroundings and what he was actually doing, Peter began to sink. For the first time he cried out, "Lord, save me." The great Doctor of Souls knew what was in Peter. Jesus had brought faith to the heart and voice of Simon Peter. Do not get distracted by the storm at sea or walking on water or the near drowning. "Lord, save me" is the heart of the story.

Of course that is easy for us to say! It is easier to recognize Christ working this way in someone else 2000 years ago than when it happens to *us* today! Peter did indeed nearly drown! In similar circumstances a man of lesser faith might very well conclude that 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 so easily come 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 proclivity of fallen human nature.

Today's gospel has a different set of incidental circumstances. But we see the same great Physician bringing 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 did, after all, want nothing for herself but healing for her daughter.) But the conditions were no accident! We do not know just how Our Lord Jesus set up the situation that led to this exchange. Neither do we know to what extent the Lord set up the conditions that led to Peter's request to walk on water. (Does the Lord sometimes set you up, and me?) In any event, the Lord Jesus gave this woman the definite impression He wanted to be left alone. At first she gets the silent treatment. Then Jesus remarked to His disciples in her hearing that He only deals with Jews. Finally, the Lord called her a *dog*. That was a great insult in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, even if it seems tame by today's crude invective.

But the woman did not take "no" for an answer. And we recall that on other occasions Our Blessed Lord told us this is *exactly* how we are to treat our Heavenly Father. We are to clamor to Him with loving insistence. The chairman of

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the board is treated with deference during the business day. But his young son does not think in those terms. This man is his father. And when he comes home, the boy gives no thought to crumpling up his father's business suit and evening newspaper in order to climb into his daddy's lap before dinner and get some attention. The Syro-Phoenician woman is behaving in a way the Lord commends. The great furnace of love Catholic devotion calls the Sacred Heart must have been smiling. And the Word of God gave voice to that smile. "O woman, great is thy faith."

Jesus invariably used situations such as miracle healings in order to bring souls closer to Him. Think of the Lord's visitation to Mary and Martha of Bethany after the death of their brother Lazarus. Jesus did not come to console. He said to Martha "I am the Resurrection and the Life." That is a strange form of condolence unless the speaker just happens to *be* the Resurrection and the Life and the One Who defeats death! Lazarus, of course came forth wearing his grave clothes because one day he would need them again. But he and his sisters had come to a closer faith and trust in Christ through the tragic illness and death Lazarus suffered.

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. Those things were true and good. But the crucial thing was she really knew, deep down, Who Christ is. She knew when very few others knew at that time. And Jesus wanted her to bring this faith to the surface and declare it in words.

All the apparent rudeness and aloofness was actually the working of Christ's *compassion*. It brought this woman the opportunity to express what was in her heart. Christ knew that 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, by the way. And it is "by the way". The daughter would likely go on to live our typical life of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain and then she would eventually die. *But her mother had come to faith in Jesus Christ*. Her declaration of that faith was so eloquent it became a part of Holy Scriptures! Her faith, and she who had it, would live forever.