



Module 3: *Instrumentum laboris* / Part II: Pathways

Meditation by Rev. Timothy Radcliffe, O.P.,

Thursday, 10th October 2024

Today we begin to think about the processes through which Church changes, the *percorsi* we must take. The following strange text may help us to see how this happens: “Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly” (Matthew 15 21 – 28).

At first sight it looks as if Jesus is being rude, calling her a dog. He only makes an exception for her daughter because of her personal faith. “I have come only to the lost sheep of Israel ... all right, and *you*.’

But this incident comes between the feeding of the five thousand, which symbolises the mission to the Jews, and the feeding of the four thousand, which points to the mission to the Gentiles. Jesus told the woman there was only enough bread was for the children of the household, but a few verses later there will be more than enough bread for everyone, seven baskets full of left overs. It is a moment of profound transition.

How did this happen? At the heart is the silence of Jesus. “He did not answer her at all.” This silence is not a rebuff. It is the silence of which Madre Maria Grazia spoke so beautifully during the retreat. She said that “at the root of every prayer, of every work for God vibrates the silent Breath of God.” (“Alla radice di ogni preghiera, di ogni “opera per Dio” vibra il silenzioso Soffio di Dio.¹”)

¹ Meditation at lauds, October 1, 2024.



In this silence Our Lord listens to the woman and listens to his Father. The Church enters more deeply into the mystery of the Divine Love by dwelling with deep questions to which we have no quick answers. At the Council of Jerusalem: how may the Gentiles be admitted to the Church? At Nicaea, how can we affirm that Jesus was truly God and truly human? At Chalcedon, how God could be truly three and truly one?

Our task in the Synod is to live with difficult questions and not, like the disciples, get rid of them. What are ours here? The woman comes for her tormented daughter. Surely we must respond to all the cries of mothers and father from all over the world for the young daughters and sons caught up in war and poverty. We must not shut our ears, like the disciples then.

Also there are deep questions which underlie so many of our discussions. How can men and women, made in the image and likeness of God, be equal and yet different? We must not avoid the question, like the disciples, by denying either the equality or the difference. And how can the Church be the community of the baptised, all equal, and yet the Body of Christ, with different roles and hierarchy? These are deep questions.

We advance into the mystery of Divine Love by living with these questions, praying about them, listening to each other, pondering on them day and night. As the psalm says, “God pours gifts on his beloved as they slumber” (127.2). Unless the bed collapses!

In this story, the breakthrough comes through a strange conversation: “It is not fair to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs”; “Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master’s table.” This looks offensive. How could Jesus refer to this woman and her daughter as dogs. But Matthew has taken this incident from Mark’s gospel where the woman is Syrophenician. At Ashkelon, a cemetery for 700 dogs was discovered. They were small dogs that had died of natural causes². Small statues of dogs were found. It seems that dogs were their best friends, treasured members of their household. As a Dominican, I understand this. We are called the “Dogs of the Lord”, *Domini canes*!

So Our Lord is being supremely creative, reaching out to her idea of a household in which dogs have a beloved place. For the Jews, dogs were unclean animals not allowed in the house. They are outside the door, like those who licked the wounds of Lazarus. Jesus reaches out to *her*

² Rebekah LIU. “A Dog under the Table at the Messianic Banquet: A study of Mark 7. 24 – 30”, *Andrew’s University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 2, 2010, pp. 251-255.



experience and language. He transcends the cultural limitations of his people. “Let it be done for you as you wish”. St Catherine of Siena sees this as a great promise of freedom. She writes, “It is here that God’s boundless goodness reveals the treasure he has given to our souls, the treasure of our own free will.”³

Many people want this Synod to give an immediate Yes or No on various issues! But that is *not* how the Church advances into the deep mystery of the Divine Love. We must not run away from the difficult questions, like the disciples, who say Shut her up! We dwell with these questions in the silence of prayer and mutual listening. We listen, as someone said, not so as to reply but so as to learn. We stretch open our imagination to new ways of being the household of God which has room for everyone. Otherwise, as we say in England, we shall just be rearranging the desk chairs on the Titanic.

Despite the hostile reception of the disciples, the woman stays. She does not give up and go away. Please stay, whatever your frustrations with the Church. Go on questioning! *Together* we shall discover the Lord’s will.

³ Le Lettere, 1.262, Quoted by Paul Murray OP, *St Catherine of Siena: Mystic of Fire, Preacher of Freedom*, Word on Fire Institute, Park Ridge, 2020, p. 30