



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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Not for the Innocent, but for the Guilty Week of February 10, 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

And His disciples came and begged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us...."
(Matthew 15:23)

It is difficult to adequately describe the revulsion with which our Lord's disciples would have reacted to the woman who came to Jesus for help in Sunday's Gospel lesson. St. Matthew says she was a "Canaanite woman", a phrase that would have brought to mind all the terrible things associated with the Canaanites in the history of God's people: Sodom and Gomorrah, idolatry in the "high places" on the mountains and child sacrifice to the demon gods of the Canaanites. The book of Leviticus expressly forbids the people from having anything to do with the Canaanites; the righteous of God were to be "separate" and "pure" and stay very much "apart" from Canaanite sin. So you see, an idolatrous Canaanite woman would be immediately shunned by those who were of God. So when such a one came to Jesus asking for Him to drive a demon out of her daughter, the immediate reaction of those who followed Jesus would have been astonishment and disgust: "What does she want with the Holy One of God? Send her away!" Many would have undoubtedly thought in their hearts that she deserved the fate that had befallen her; that it was her own fault that her daughter was possessed by demons, for after

all, did she not subject her child to the idolatry of those who denied the true God and bowed down instead to the demon idols?

There are many Christians who react in a similar way to those who come down with certain illnesses or who experience hard times in their lives. I've often heard Christians of this or that persuasion saying incredibly cruel things when people are diagnosed with AIDS, or when they fall into hard times, or when they speak of addictions to alcohol, drugs or pornography. I've heard Christians say that those who fall into sin deserve to suffer and that we should stay separate from them, that they must bear the ramifications of their own sinful actions, their own self-defeating behaviors, by themselves.

But who among us, Brothers and Sisters, can bear the burden of our own sins? Only the Lord can release us, as only the Lord could release the Canaanite woman from the horrific burden of the sin she brought upon her own daughter, possessed by a demon. Christ did not trivialize the sin of the Canaanite woman, but He did respond to her cry for help. He entered into a relationship with her, questioned her about her supplication, and acknowledged her faith in Him, for did she not cry, as did the blind man from last week's lesson, "*Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me?*"

We must neither trivialize sin nor turn away from those who have been hurt by sin. The great lesson of the story of the Canaanite woman is that the Church is above all a hospital, not a court of judgment. Yes, we must distance ourselves from sin; we must strive to be pure, holy as the Lord Himself is Holy. We must turn with disgust and revulsion from that which separates us from God and brings terrible suffering upon others and ourselves. But we may never turn from the sinner. We must be ready at every moment to lead those who are hurt and in suffering – particularly by their own sin – to the Lord Jesus Christ. For is it not the case that we ourselves deserve the evils we bring upon ourselves all too truly? How then can we condemn our brother or our sister who brings such hardship upon themselves by their actions as well?

I have often heard people express willingness to help the innocent. But Christ did not come to help the innocent; He came to help the guilty. The innocent do not need Him with the same degree of desperation as do the guilty. For truly, those who are guilty are the most pitiable of all creatures; they cannot save themselves, nor can they help those who have been hurt by their sinful choices. They can only reach out to the Lord in their misery, like the Canaanite woman, and cry, "*Lord, help me – and those whom I have hurt.*"

This is our faith. The *Church* is where there must be healing and hope, for nowhere else is there the One Who ever forgives and ever gives Himself for the sinner. The Church is the one great alternative. Not for the righteous, but for sinners did the Lord come; not for the innocent, but for the guilty; for people like us who like the Canaanite woman have nowhere or no one else to turn to – only to the Lord Jesus Christ. To Him be all praise and honor and glory forever!

Remember what the LORD has done for you! Give Him thanks and praise! *Glory to His NAME for all things!* Pray for me, His most unworthy of priests.

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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