**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MARK-032**. **CHILDREN AND LITTLE DOGS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"24.* *And from thence He arose, and went into the borders of Tyre and Sidon, and entered Into an house, and would have no man know it: but He could not be hid. 25. For a certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of Him, and came and fell at His feet: 26. The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation; and she besought Him that He would cast forth the devil out of her daughter. 87. But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs. 28. And she answered and said unto Him, Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs. 29. And He said unto her, For this saying go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter. 30. And when she was come to her house, she found the devil gone out, and her daughter laid upon the bed."*

*Mark 7:24-30*

Our Lord desired to withdraw from the excited crowds who were flocking after Him as a mere miracle-worker and from the hostile espionage of emissaries of the Pharisees, which had come from Jerusalem. Therefore He sought seclusion in heathen territory. He, too, knew the need of quiet, and felt the longing to plunge into privacy, to escape for a time from the pressure of admirers and of foes, and to go where no man knew Him. How near to us that brings Him! And how the remembrance of it helps to explain His demeanour to the Syrophcenician woman, so unlike His usual tone! Naturally the presence of Jesus leaked out, and perhaps the very effort to avoid notice attracted it. Rumour would have carried His name across the border, and the tidings of His being among them would stir hope in some hearts that felt the need of His help. Of such was this woman, whom Mark describes first, generally, as a Greek(that is, a Gentile), and then particularly as a Syrophcenician by race; that is, one of that branch of the Phoenician race who inhabited maritime Syria, in contradistinction from the other branch inhabiting North-eastern Africa, Carthage, and its neighbourhood. Her deep need made her bold and persistent, as we learn in detail from Matthew, who is in this narrative more graphic than Mark. He tells us that she attacked Jesus in the way, and followed Him, pouring out her loud petitions, to the annoyance of the disciples. They thought that they were carrying out His wish for privacy in suggesting that it would be best to send her awaywith her prayer granted, and so stop her crying after us, which might raise a crowd, and defeat the wish. We owe to Matthew the further facts of the woman's recognition of Jesus as the Son of David, and of the strange ignoring of her cries, and of His answer to the disciplessuggestion, in which He limited His mission to Israel, and so explained to them His silence to her. Mark omits all these points, and focuses all the light on the two things--Christ's strange and apparently harsh refusal, and the woman's answer, which won her cause.

Certainly our Lord's words are startlingly unlike Him, and as startlingly like the Jewish pride of race and contempt for Gentiles. But that the woman did not take them so is clear; and that was not due only to her faith, but to something in Him which gave her faith a foothold. We are surely not to suppose that she drew from His words an inference which He did not perceive in them, and that He was, as some commentators put it, caught in His own words. Mark alone gives us the first clause of Christ's answer to the woman's petition: Let the children first be filled. And that firstdistinctly says that their prerogative is priority, not monopoly. If there is a first, there will follow a second. The very image of the great house in which the children sit at the table, and the little dogsare in the room, implies that children and dogs are part of one household; and Jesus meant by it just what the woman found in it,--the assurance that the meal-time for the dogs would come when the children had done. That is but a picturesque way of stating the method of divine revelation through the medium of the chosen people, and the objections to Christ's words come at last to be objections to the committingof the oracles of Godto the Jewish race; that is to say, objections to the only possible way by which a historical revelation could be given. It must have personal mediums, a place and a sequence. It must prepare fit vehicles for itself and gradually grow in clearness and contents. And all this is just to say that revelation for the world must be first the possession of a race. The fire must have a hearth on which it can be kindled and burn, till it is sufficient to bear being carried thence.

Universalism was the goal of the necessary restriction. Pharisaism sought to make the restriction permanent. Jesus really threw open the gates to all in this very saying, which at first sounds so harsh. Firstimplies second, children and little dogs are all parts of the one household. Christ's personal ministry was confined to Israel for obvious and weighty reasons. He felt, as Matthew tells us, that He said in this incident that He was not sent but to the lost sheep of that nation. But His world-wide mission was as clear to Him as its temporary limit, and in His first discourse in the synagogue at Nazareth He proclaimed it to a scowling crowd. We cannot doubt that His sympathetic heart yearned over this poor woman, and His seemingly rough speech was meant partly to honour the law which ruled His mission even in the act of making an exception to it, and partly to test, and so to increase, her faith.

Her swift laying of her finger on the vulnerable point in the apparent refusal of her prayer may have been due to a woman's quick wit, but it was much more due to a mother's misery and to a suppliant's faith. There must have been something in Christ's look, or in the cadence of His voice, which helped to soften the surface harshness of His words, and emboldened her to confront Him with the plain implications of His own words. What a constellation of graces sparkles in her ready reply! There is humility in accepting the place He gives her; insight in seeing at once a new plea in what might have sent her away despairing; persistence in pleading; confidence that He can grant her request and that He would gladly do so. Our Lord's treatment of her was amply justified by its effects. His words were like the hard steel that strikes the flint and brings out a shower of sparks. Faith makes obstacles into helps, and stones of stumbling into stepping-stones to higher things. If we will take the place which He gives us, and hold fast our trust in Him even when He seems silent to us, and will so far penetrate His designs as to find the hidden purpose of good in apparent repulses, the honey secreted deep in the flower, we shall share in this woman's blessing in the measure in which we share in her faith.

Jesus obviously delighted in being at liberty to stretch His commission so as to include her in its scope. Joyful recognition of the ingenuity of her pleading, and of her faith's bringing her within the circle of the children, are apparent in His word, For this saying go thy way. He ever looks for the disposition in us which will let Him, in accordance with His great purpose, pour on us His full-flowing tide of blessing, and nothing gladdens Him more than that, by humble acceptance of our assigned place, and persistent pleading, and trust that will not be shaken, we should make it possible for Him to see in us recipients of His mercy and healing grace.