



The Canaanite Woman, from the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (15th-century Book of Hours)

SESSION 3 / THE PRAYER OF HOPE

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer (Romans 12:12).

Theme Hope and prayer are inseparable. Prayer is always an act of hope in God, an act of desire for God and of trust in Him. We exercise hope in prayer, as we come to God in our poverty.

Welcome: We Pray and Share Together (15 mins)

O God,
 send forth your Holy Spirit
 into our hearts that we might perceive,
 into our minds that we might remember,
 into our souls that we might meditate.
 Inspire us to speak with love, holiness,
 tenderness and mercy.
 Teach, guide and direct our thoughts and senses
 from beginning to end.
 May your grace help us to see with your eyes
 and to act with your love and light in our hearts.
 May we be strengthened with wisdom from on high
 for the sake and glory of your kingdom.
 Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
 Amen.

In a period of calm and a space of trust, each one of us is invited to share briefly one thing that has happened in the past week. It could be one thing that has given you cause for concern, something shared during the last time you met as a group or something that has given you cause to celebrate.

In this moment of peace and fellowship, we pray for the good of the group. Each member is invited to offer up any personal intentions. We also pray for the good of the Church, for wisdom in our country and for the common good. Let us also bring to mind the poor, the sick and those who have died.

We join together in praying: Our Father...

Read and Reflect on the Scriptures Matthew 15:21-28 (5 mins)

Note: In this account from Matthew also recorded in Mark 7, Jesus journeys from the Jewish territory to the pagan district of Tyre and Sidon, only to return to Galilee immediately afterwards. Perhaps Jesus decides to visit the pagan district only to elicit and answer the Canaanite woman's prayer of hope, a model for our own.

A variety of short prayers before the reading of Scripture can be found on page 46.

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out 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." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread 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, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Meditate on the Word Matthew 15:21-28 (20 mins)

Once the Scripture passage has been read you are asked to choose a word or phrase that has struck you. Underline it with a pen or you might wish to simply hold it in mind. You will be invited to share the word or phrase with the group.

Another person will then read the passage. While you listen attentively, repeat the process of holding onto a word or phrase, making a note and sharing it. In doing this, you are invited to consider the following questions:

How have these words or phrases resonated in my heart and in my mind?

What is the Lord saying to me at this very moment in my life?

In what way has my reading of this passage of Holy Scripture changed me?

How has it helped me to resolve to be more Christ-like in the coming days?

You are encouraged to re-read the Holy Scripture during the coming week, revisiting these questions.

Explore and Reflect on the Theme (25 mins)

Before being answered, the woman's prayer is rejected *three times* by Jesus. First, 'he did not answer her a word.' Then, he responds to her indirectly, saying to his disciples who are annoyed by her pleading: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Finally, he rejects her request directly: 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' Having endured three rejections, the woman nevertheless perseveres and succeeds on her fourth attempt: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' In this, she teaches us how to pray and never give up, using Jesus' own words of rejection to her advantage. Instead of destroying the woman's faith and hope in Jesus, the three rejections have made them stronger, until she obtains what she desires from Him.

Jesus praises the woman's faith, yet hope is also central to this account. Although faith and hope are almost interchangeable² in the Bible, a distinction can be made between faith, which concerns *what we know*, and hope which concerns *what we desire and do*. The woman *knows* in faith that Jesus can heal her daughter, and she *acts* accordingly, in hope: *she prays*. Prayer involves both faith and hope. Faith knows that God has the infinite power and mercy to respond to all the prayers that are made to him in accord with his will. Hope acts on the knowledge of faith, in desire for what it does not yet possess and in trust that God will grant it, by asking for it in humility. Hope is crucially necessary, since it is possible to believe that God can give us what we desire and yet not pray for it, and so fail to obtain it.

The gospel of the Canaanite woman helps us to understand the power and necessity of prayer. In the account, it seems that Jesus changes his mind, first refusing and then accepting to answer the woman's prayer simply because she will not take 'no' for an answer. This change of mind is only apparent, to teach us that prayer has a significant role in God's plan of salvation. God does not need our prayers since He is the One who creates and redeems, but he makes room for us to be active participants in the coming of His Kingdom by our actions, and most of all by our prayers, offered for ourselves and for others in accordance with His will.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 2: "'Hope', in fact, is a key word in Biblical faith—so much so that in several passages the words "faith" and "hope" seem interchangeable.'

Hope is a gift, a decision, and a dynamic act which is ours alone to make. In hope, I can choose to spend time everyday praying for the coming of the Kingdom, for peace, for the conversion of all hearts to God, and for all the specific intentions which are entrusted to me through the circumstances of life. In doing so, I am assured, from the example of the Canaanite woman, that Jesus will hear my prayer and answer it, even if I have to persevere through darkness and apparent rejection. All of us have been given the dignity and power to make a difference in this world by what we can achieve in love through grace but most of all by what we can ask from God who alone can change the human heart and bring light into the darkness. Our decision to act and so to make a difference is motivated by hope.



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Responding to what has been heard

By committing ourselves to action we are saying that we want to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others. We are committing to make hope resonate in our lives. What have you heard today that you find challenging? What do you find affirming? What are you going to do about what you have heard today?

Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord (10 mins)

You are invited to close with a time of meditation on Psalm 13(12). Read it slowly, pause between verses, reflect on its meaning for your life and your journey in faith, hope and love. You may also wish to conclude with the Lord's Prayer, another prayer of your own choosing or a moment of silence.

A: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
 How long must I bear grief in my soul,
 have sorrow in my heart all day long?
 How long shall my enemy prevail over me?

B: Look, and answer me, O Lord my God!
 Give light to my eyes lest I fall asleep in death;
 lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him";
 lest my foes rejoice when they see me fall.

A: As for me, I trust in your merciful love.
 Let my heart rejoice in your salvation.
 I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

All: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was
 in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

A blessing taken from the Liturgy of the Hours is included here.

May the Lord bless us and keep us from all evil
 and bring us to everlasting life. Amen.

In hope, we are confident that God will answer our prayer

Hope is expressed and nourished in prayer, especially in the Our Father, the summary of everything that hope leads us to desire.

CCC 1820

The Holy Spirit, who instructs us to celebrate the liturgy in expectation of Christ's return, teaches us to pray in hope. Conversely, the prayer of the Church and personal prayer nourish hope in us. The psalms especially, with their concrete and varied language, teach us to fix our hope in God: 'I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.'

CCC 2657

Unless we wept in Your ears, there would be no hope for us remaining. Whence, then, is it that such sweet fruit is plucked from the bitterness of life, from groans, tears, sighs, and lamentations? Is it the hope that You hear us that sweetens it? This is true of prayer, for therein is a desire to approach unto You.

St Augustine

To limit your desires and your hopes is to misunderstand God's infinite goodness!

St Therese of Lisieux

We can never have too much confidence in the good God... As we hope in Him so shall we receive.

St Therese of Lisieux

It is impossible to trust too much in the Divine assistance.

St Thomas Aquinas



Meditate on Sacred Art: Visio Divina

What is the exact moment illustrated in the painting? Where are the disciples of Jesus? Why are they in the background, leaving Jesus and the woman alone?

Describe what Jesus and the woman express through their physical attitude and gestures. What do they teach us about prayer and confidence?

Where is Jesus' right hand? What do we know about the Heart of Jesus?

In prayer, turn to Jesus who opens His Sacred Heart to you, and place your trust entirely in Him.

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (1674) by Francisco Antolinez y Sarabia