

JANUARY 29, 2017

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

Matthew 15: 21-28

“AGAIN AND AGAIN....LET US PRAY TO THE LORD”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the greatest English poets of the 1800s. Back in those days, poets were celebrities. Nowadays, most of us would have a hard time thinking of the names of any poets alive now, but back then poets were famous and had fans. And they got fan letters! Coleridge received many such letters from his fans---some just saying how they loved his writings, some wanting advice, some wanting to meet him, etc. This could have presented a problem. If Coleridge got busy reading and answering all that correspondence, it would cut a lot into the time he had to write poems.

But that never became a problem at all. That’s because Coleridge had a simple way of dealing with all those letters.....He never answered even one, because he never opened and read even one! (“Literary Reminiscences”, Thomas De Quincy, in Early Essayists, edited by F. W. Roe, Harcourt, Bruce, & Co., 1923, p. 373)

Sometimes when we have something special and important to pray to God about we might think that God is like Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Our prayers are like the letters Coleridge received. And God isn’t answering. Maybe God is not reading His mail!

But, in reality, God is not like Coleridge. He does “read His mail”. He hears our prayers-----and He answers. Not always when we want, not always in the way we want---but He does answer.

In our gospel lesson today from Matthew 15, a woman asks Jesus to heal her daughter of a very severe case of demon possession. The Lord doesn’t answer that prayer very quickly. He seems to really be testing her. He speaks to her harshly; He more or less verbally pushes her away. But that woman was stubborn and persistent. She wouldn’t give up even when it seemed hopeless that the Lord would help her daughter. She just kept right on asking, even to the annoyance of the disciples. She persisted. And finally her prayer was answered. And her daughter was made well by our Lord.

The Lord was impressed by her stubbornness, by how strong her faith was----strong enough to not give up. And He said to her in verse 28----“O woman, great is your faith.” And by saying those words, Jesus made her, that stubborn woman, a model and example for us about how to pray. Be like her, pray persistently.

Now when it comes to public worship, we Orthodox are good about persistence in prayer. That’s why our church services tend to be longer than those of most other churches---we persist in praying . All those litanies, all those “Lord, have mercies.”! Sometimes we pray “Lord, have mercy” 3 times (3 “Lord, have mercies” many times over, that is!). In some services, we pray that 12 times. And, sometimes, we go for 40!

At the start of some our litanies, we even make reference to how persistent we are. Some litanies start with the words, “Again and again, in peace, let us pray to the Lord.” “Again and again.” Not just “again”, but “again and again”!

So when it comes to our church services, we Orthodox do follow the example of the

woman in today's gospel reading-----we're persistent.

But.....how persistent are we in our own personal prayers? Do we pray? Do we pray regularly and often? And do we persist in our personal prayers in "again and again" praying to God about something even when the answer isn't coming?

Because sometimes it seems the answer just isn't coming. Phillips Brooks was one of the most famous preachers in America about 150 years ago. One day a man came to visit him in his study and saw that Brooks seemed very frustrated. Brooks was pacing the floor, back and forth, back and forth, with a frown on his face. The visitor said, "Rev. Brooks---I can see you're very troubled about something. What's wrong?" Brooks replied, "What is wrong is that I have praying and praying about something----but God hasn't answered me. I am in a hurry, but it seems God is not in a hurry!" ("Our Daily Bread", 1/24/95)

That happens to all of us sometimes. Why? Well, we can't be sure, but here are some possibilities to consider:

----God's time is different than our time. Maybe the answer seems to us slow in coming; maybe it doesn't seem slow to God. As the Bible says, "a day is like a thousand years".....

----God likes us to talk to Him. When we keep praying because we haven't gotten an answer yet, then we talk to Him more than if He answered right away!

---If our prayer involves wanting someone else to decide something or change in some way, things get more complicated. Because the person we are praying for has free will and God won't violate their free will. He will try to persuade them to change but He won't force them to. Persuasion takes time..... And persuasion may not succeed.....

----God's plans sometimes are just simply different than ours. What we pray for because we think it is good, God may know is not actually good. And so He won't answer that prayer in the way we wish. The answer may be simply, "no".

So there can be different reasons why the answer to prayer doesn't come when we think it should. To sum up: God knows best. St. Isaac of Syria wrote the following words about 1400 years ago—"If God is slow to grant your request and you do not receive what you ask for promptly, do not be sad-----for you are not wiser than God." (Daily Readings, St. Isaac, Templegate, 1989, p. 48)

But if God isn't actually giving you "no" for an answer, and you still think what you are praying for is a good thing (not just something selfish for yourself, like a fancier car or more expensive vacations), then keep praying. Be persistent like the woman in today's gospel reading. "Again and again", keep praying.

I think perhaps among the very hardest prayers to not get quick answers to are when we are praying for our loved one, especially our own children. I'm not speaking here about praying for their health, their success, etc. I'm speaking about when we are praying for the salvation of their souls.

As Christians, we are walking on the road to heaven. Saved by Christ, if we remain faithful and stay on the road, we'll be there. And we want our children there with us, too. That should be our greatest desire---to spend eternity together with our children.

And so we should pray and pray and pray for their salvation. Not just when they are little. But also, maybe even more so, when they are grown up.

Some of you have mentioned to me your sadness because some of your children have

drifted away spiritually-----drifted away from faith, from the church, from God. And it breaks your hearts. But don't despair. And don't get angry at them. Instead, pray and pray "again and again". Pray hard that their souls will be saved. Pray for them persistently like the woman in today's gospel reading prayed for her child.

Does it sometimes seem like "no" is the only answer you get when you pray like this for your children? Maybe that "no" isn't really a "no". Maybe it's a "later". So keep praying. They seem to have left God out of their lives? Perhaps it will stay that way for the rest of your years. But maybe they will come back to the Lord later, when you're already gone from this world. So keep hoping...and keep praying.

And guess what you will be doing in heaven? Praying. And one of the main things I think we will pray about "up there" is the spiritual welfare of our children still "down here". So persist in praying for them now---and then you can persist some more in the life to come!

St. Monica is probably best known for being the mother of the famous Church Father, St. Augustine. He is one of those men so famous that even his mother is well known. But Augustine most certainly was not always a Saint. In fact, he wasn't even a believer in Christ. And holy Monica was very bothered by that fact. So she prayed for him to come to believe and be baptized. And she prayed and she prayed and she prayed..... Did she pray for one year for Augustine to be saved? No, more. 5 years? No, more. 10 years? No more. 20 years? No, more. She persisted in prayer for **30** long years until finally the answer came and her son believed and was baptized. He became a Christian, he became a bishop, he became a great theologian. Most important, he became a Saint.

Now what if St. Monica, after praying for 29 years and 11 months, had said to herself, "That's enough! All these years and the prayer hasn't been answered. I give up!" Well, perhaps not such a happy ending! But she didn't quit praying. She kept on and after 30 years she got the answer from God and Augustine came to salvation in Christ.

So don't ever stop praying for your child, especially for that child who is spiritually adrift. Maybe your child is more resistant to God than even St. Augustine. It took 30 years of prayer for him. Maybe your child will take 40 years of prayer. Then go for it. Pray for 40 years (or more if you need!)---it will be well worth it to have him or her with you in the joys of the life to come.

So be persistent in your prayers----especially for your children. Remember the example of the woman in today's gospel who kept praying for her child. Do the same for yours. Remember St. Monica who prayed for 30 years for her child---and keep praying for yours. Just keep on praying!

