

certainly has no inkling of the Christ problem. She is a poor, unknown beyond the border of Tyre and Sidon. She is a secondary figure, such as those we can see in the obscure light on the margin of the paintings of Rembrandt.

Yet on this figure who had no knowledge and contributed nothing to history there suddenly falls the light of the eyes of Jesus. He speaks to her the surprising word: "Great is thy faith." He has never said this to any of His disciples who left all for His sake. To only one other had He said it, and that was again to an unnamed secondary figure, the centurion of Capernaum.

What has she done that Jesus should thus extol her faith? She has simply met Him and stretched out her hand to Him.

There are some among us who cannot make anything of one or another dogma or who have doubts that they cannot resolve. They should prick up their ears and hear about this great faith. For it does not consist in regarding something as true, or in a capacity for dogmatic understanding, but in a struggle, in a dialogue with God.

We can easily see what course this dialogue takes. There is outcry and gesticulation. The need is laid before God. Then there is silence. There are dangerous pauses. There are moments when understanding breaks off, when crises arise, when it seems any moment as though one or the other will get up and go. And then finally accord is reached, and Jesus stands up, stretches forth His hand for time and eternity and says: "Well done, thou faithful child..." Silence, rejection, pauses, acceptance -- all have their place in this dialogue. Those who want to speak with Jesus should pay attention, for we are about to consider one of the most profound and indeed unfathomable stories in the New Testament.

How is it that the woman comes to Jesus? We are simply told: "And, behold, a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts." Yet these colourless words are not without significance. For to come she has to overcome the prejudices

2. The Silence of God¹

Then Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.

And, behold a woman of Canaan came out of the same coasts, and cried unto him, saying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.

But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us. But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs.

And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.

Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour (Matthew 15:21-28).

THIS WOMAN IS ONE of the secondary and marginal figures in the world of the New Testament. She does not stand in the spotlight like the main characters in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. She is not a disciple or a high-priest or a prophet or a Pilate. All these help to push the wheel of history. They all know something about Jesus as followers or opponents in the great drama then being enacted on the world stage. This woman neither advances the history nor has any essential knowledge. She can make no profession of faith. She is quite unaffected by the question whether Jesus will conquer the world or whether He must suffer. She

1. Preached in 1943 during the battle of Stalingrad.

of her people against the figure of the Nazarene. She has even to cross the frontier of another land. She has to enter a country which in nationality and outlook is divided by an abyss from all that is accepted around her. Finally, her coming involves a risk. She knows of Him only by hearsay. Perhaps the reports are deceptive. She has to accept the possibility not merely that her action will be disappointingly futile but that it will leave her open to censure.

But all faith begins this way. We must come to Jesus even at the risk of being disillusioned. If she had remained at home and never crossed that frontier, Jesus would still have been the Christ, but she would not have entered the sphere of His blessings and would have remained solitary and without hope.

It is just the same with us. We have to cross the frontier of the centuries to approach the Nazarene. We have to cross the frontier of a foreign land which is distant and strange. We have always to cross the frontier of the great events around us and to enter the stillness which surrounds Jesus and which moves and shakes the world more than all the Vulcan strokes of historical catastrophes and revelations which in these days shatter the earth. This, then, is how she comes to Jesus.

But quick though she is, she is no match for Jesus of Nazareth. There are tests and pauses and silences. Luther says that the woman had first to be buffeted before help was given to her.

Jesus is first silent in face of her request: "He answered her not a word." The silence of God is the greatest test of our faith. We all know this. It is natural that we should think of the title of Dwinger's book *And God Is Silent*, which he accusingly adopts as a motto for the terrible events in Russia. But why refer to books! Can we not all sing about this today? Can we not shriek it out? Is not God silent about Stalingrad? What do we hear above and under its ruins? Do we not hear the roar of artillery, the tumult of the

world and the cries of the dying? But where is the voice of God? When we think of God, is it not suddenly so quiet, so terribly quiet, in the witches' kitchen of this hell, that one can hear a pin drop even though grenades are bursting around us? There is neither voice nor answer. And even if I think I hear God — hear Him in judgment as the One by whom the proud waves are stayed (Job 38:11) — He is silent again the next moment when I have to ask: Why this man, my brother or my husband?

Just like ourselves, John the Baptist was tortured by questions in prison; and there is great comfort in the fact that it is not only we men of the twentieth century who put such God-forsaken questions and suffer under the silence of God. The Baptist, too, put the anxious question: What sense is there, and does it not drive us mad, that the so-called Messiah moves about with His disciples in the sunshine while His herald is so completely incarcerated behind impregnable walls and stands under threat of death? In despairing complaint he rises against this destiny of the silence of Jesus. "How long do you keep us in suspense? Tell us freely whether you are Christ." Call down from heaven that you are. Do you not see how dreadful are the effects of your silence? Do you not see how much more merciful it would be if this voice were to ring out so that all would have to hear it, and would not therefore be put on the rack and plunged into the torment of uncertainty? Why do you allow this vacillation between faith and doubt? Why do you not make things clear, God?

Men would not keep silence for so long about what is happening. They could not see so much blood shed or hear the cry of sufferers so long. Does this mean that they are more merciful? Not at all! The disciples are men who cannot bear the silence of Jesus or see the distress of the woman. But not by a long way does this mean that they are more merciful. The woman senses this; otherwise she would have turned to the weary and therefore more helpful

disciples. She realizes, however, that they are not merciful in yielding to her cry for help. They have poor nerves. This makes some people seem to be sympathetic and neighborly. But they are not. The invalid and the wayside beggar do not really believe in the mercy of men. Otherwise they would not utter so frequently their moving complaints.

The woman turns rather to the silent Jesus than to men. Obviously the silence of God is to be measured by other standards than that of men. The Canaanitish woman gropes behind the silence. Even though she has to tarry the night long and till morning, her heart will not despair of God's power nor be afraid. So it often is when God does not answer our prayers. Behind the silence are His higher thoughts. He is fitting stone to stone in His plan for the world and our lives, even though we can see only a confused and meaningless jumble of stones heaped together under a silent heaven. How many meaningless blows of fate there seem to be! — life, suffering, injustice, death, massacres, destruction; and all under a silent heaven which apparently has nothing to say. The cross was God's greatest silence. Then the power of darkness was allowed to make its final bid against the Son of God. Then the demons were unleashed and the most dreadful passions since the fall of Adam were given free rein. And God had nothing to say. There was simply the cry of the Dying asking of the silence why God had forsaken Him. God was still silent even when dumb nature began to speak in an eloquent gesture and the sun withdrew its light. The stars cried out, and God was silent.

But now hear the great mystery of this silence. The very hour when God answered not a word or syllable was the hour of the great turning point when the veil of the temple was rent and God's heart was laid bare with all its wounds. Even when He was silent, God suffered with us. In His silence He experienced the fellowship of death and the depths with us. Even when we thought He did not care, or was

dead, He knew all about us and behind the dark wings He did His work of love. We live in the power of this Golgotha night of silence. Where should we be without the cross? Where should we be without the knowledge that God sends His Son to us in the silent depths and valleys, that He is our Fellow in death; that He has indeed His high thoughts, that they come with power at Easter in glorious fulfillments surpassing all our expectations?

Truly the silence of God is different from that of men. When Jesus lay silent and asleep in the ship, He was more kind and His arm was more near to help and more certain than the anxious cry of the doubting disciples suggests. The silence of God and of Jesus is not of indifference. It is the silence of higher thoughts. It does not imply a silent destiny. The woman sees this. Hence she persists in spite of the silence and does not let her hands fall.

There follows the second rebuff and therewith the second test of faith. The silence is suddenly broken. Low speech is heard, from which two sentences stand out, first: "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel"; and second: "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs." This obviously means that you are not one of the children who are my concern.

Between these gloomy statements there is only the cry: "Lord, help me"; and this cry, which ascends like a rocket, is encircled and apparently quenched by the power of the divine silence.

What is Jesus trying to convey? Simply that it is an integral part of God's plan of salvation to begin His work in Israel. It is at this lowest point of the great burden of humanity that He will first bring relief. Only when this has been done will He extend His work. So far, however, this first task has not been completed. The turn of the Gentiles has not yet come. Jesus is not yet available to this woman. In other words, the woman has to see that, while God is good, He is not good for me. Jesus Christ is the Saviour,

but He is not my Saviour. There is a communion of saints, but I do not belong to it.

Have we not all had similar experiences? Many can confess today how kind is this Jesus of Nazareth. We should like to dwell in His peace. In bitter hours many good words concerning Him have soothed and restored us like a mother's hand. And when many of us hear this word we will perhaps go away like Faust on Easter night, when at a very dangerous and desperate moment in his life, the poisoned cup already at his lips, he suddenly heard the Easter bells which evoked magical recollection of his home and childhood. For many the words of Jesus will perhaps be a similar magic, greeting us from afar.

But then comes the bitter realization: "I do not belong to Him." Why not? There are so many puzzling features about this figure. There is the cross, the resurrection. There are the dogmas. I should like to dwell in His peace, but there are so many things in the Church and Christianity that I can make nothing of. I should like to receive His good words like balsam, but I cannot swallow these other things. And finally — this is the ultimate obstacle — I find it impossible to be a Christian when there are so many objections, when God so often seems to be so terribly unjust and human arrogance triumphs, when faith in love and righteousness is left in the lurch and when the loving Father above the pavilion of the stars is just a childish dream. How can I be a Christian? I can perhaps agree that those to whom faith is given, who can accept all this, are fortunate. But faith is not given to me. I do not belong.

How many speak like this and therefore understand the woman of Canaan: I do not belong; I cannot belong. And many think they know just why. It is all a matter, they say, of whether one can or not. Either one has this faith or not. Either one enjoys this gift or it is denied. I just cannot believe. I do not have the gift. I am left out. How fortunate are those who have it. I think of the many streets

where I have walked with good friends, and many evenings in the barracks. Our conversations about the figure of Jesus always closed with the words: I cannot; I do not belong. I think of them now, those friends, who during these conversations about Jesus of Nazareth looked from afar at a land for which they longed but from which they thought they were excluded. "You must understand," said one, "that it is not given to me; I do not have the knack. I should like to, and I will give you my hand when you go to the cross. It is too bad. We share everything else and agree at all other points."

I see them now, those good friends. And perhaps there are many like them here today — those who say: "It is not given to me; I do not belong."

Well, consider the readiness of this woman who does not merely think but is actually told authoritatively: "You do not belong." What does she do and what is her great faith in this situation? Her faith is not the possession of a special talent for swallowing difficult dogmas and necessary articles of faith, of which we hear nothing. Nor is it the enjoyment of a particular religious or metaphysical endowment, nor the lack of sufficient critical or intellectual ability to appreciate the objections.

Her faith is simply her trust that He can help me, so that she can only call upon Him and hunger and thirst after this Saviour. It is already faith, my friends, to see in oneself something of the hunger and thirst after this high and helping figure, and to surrender to it and come to Jesus. It is the hungry and thirsty and sorrowful who are called blessed by this Jesus, and does He not pronounce His "Well done" to those who cannot boast of the sufficiency or correctness of their dogmatic belief:

*Nothing of my own I bring,
Thou, O Lord, art everything.*

Those who have a hungry heart and broken spirit are the favorites of God.

There are two ways of dealing with this hunger and thirst, with this longing which we all know. One way is to suppress it instead of giving it free rein, smothering it under the little business of the day with its cares and pleasures.

The other is to take the risk of simply coming to Jesus like this woman. And truly we should take this risk, for it is true, as Augustine has said, that we could not seek God if He had not already found us. If this woman is not reluctant it is because the Lord is not reluctant — in spite of His silence.

The conversation proceeds. Indeed, it reaches its climax. We hold our breath. How will the woman react to the statement of Jesus that there is a wall of partition between them. Will she emphasize her need? Will she appeal to her great faith? Will she act like the cripple by the wayside? Will she speculate on the pity of God? Will she give way to what Walter Flex has called the coward's prayer of panic? Will she begin to whine? No. There takes place something very strange and unexpected. She says: "Truth, Lord." This means that I accept the justice of your silence, of your ignoring me. It is by no means self-evident that you should help me. You are right to pass on, Jesus of Nazareth. I have no claim on you.

We do well to grasp the tremendous implication of this thought. For it is to the effect that my acceptance by God cannot be taken for granted. That Jesus died on the cross for me cannot be taken for granted. We European Christians have gradually become accustomed to the dangerous and unhealthy idea that the grace of God is thrown at us. Voltaire cynically said of the forgiveness of God: "*C'est son métier* — it is His job." But this is not so. Things are quite different from the popular assumption. The kingdom of God is not thrust on us. The grace of God can also be silent. We certainly cannot claim it. It may be, and if so I cannot blame God, that in my last hour I will sink into darkness and the one figure who might be with me through

the gloomy portal will be missing. It is in no sense the duty or obligation of Jesus to bear my sin and to take me through the black gate of death. If He does this, it cannot be taken for granted. And I make bold to say that even the most orthodox churchman will not enter the kingdom of heaven unless he is continually surprised that mercy has been shown him. We cannot say that we do not merit wrath or that grace must be ours. There is rising up among us a host of young Christians who are tired of the new paganism. They can describe this astonishment far more clearly and realistically than those who have inherited the secure tradition of the fathers. I refer to the astonishment that there is more than a great transcendent God beyond the stars, that there is condemnation and forgiveness and God's sorrow for His children. Perhaps God has first to be jerked away from our complacent Western Christians, like a rug from under our feet, if we are to be reawakened to this surprise.

All this is implied in the "Truth, Lord." The tormented woman allows that grace may justly pass her by. Hence she has no thought of cursing Jesus.

We are now nearing the end of the dramatic dialogue. The woman continues: "Yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table." Yet — is there not here a contradiction after her previous unconditional acceptance? Is she not withdrawing and becoming illogical?

This lack of logic — if we may call it such — is the whole secret of prayer. We see it in the Lord's Prayer. For we say "Thy will be done," which is the same as "Truth, Lord," but we still ask for our daily bread and many other things. How are we to explain this contradiction? As I say, this is the deepest mystery of prayer.

For we know to whom we are saying "Thy will be done" when we ask God to fulfill His will and thus to shape our own. The petition does not mean that I must be resigned. That is no use. No, the "Truth, Lord" is spoken with a joyous undertone, for the woman knows with whom she

is dealing. And when she says "Truth" the word contains her full confidence that He will put things right. For it is assent to the love of Jesus, even though to His hidden love which waits behind the silence and in spite of His refusal, ready to break out in glory and favour and to call this woman of faith blessed. Hence this woman will not draw back when the night of the cross comes and all others flee. She will not go astray when persecutions arise, when terror reigns, when God is silent and when the love of the faithful grows cold. For she will then know that God has higher thoughts in relation to the world and that the ways of peace are trodden. It is because she has the courage to say "Truth, Lord" that she can cheerfully go on to ask: "Yet . . ." This "Yet" implies that I have not deserved to belong to you, that I have no claim on you, that you can pass by, Saviour of Nazareth.

But can you? Can you pass by someone who renounces all his merits — his achievements, his moral rectitude, even his great faith? Can you pass by someone who set all these aside and expects everything only of your love and generous hands? Can you do this, Saviour of Nazareth?

Jesus cannot. As Luther says, "this woman takes Jesus in His own words," and especially in the saying that He loves the hungry and thirsty and the spiritually poor, and that He will not despise a contrite heart. She has done what none other could do, namely, entangled the Saviour in His talk. She has "flung the sack of His promises at His feet," and He cannot step over it.

It is not her great faith that has triumphed. She has triumphed because she has taken the Saviour at His word. She has caused the heart of God to prevail against the silence of God. This is why she has great faith. And this is why she will not be the least in the kingdom of heaven.

We should apply this profound story to our own lives that it may also be true of us.

We should wrestle with this Lord, as the woman of Canaan

did, even when He seems to be silent. We should not let Him go until He blesses us. We should show Him our empty, longing hands. And He, who gives His children bread and not stones, who showed grace to a poor woman even though she was no churchwoman and enjoyed no high esteem, will also extend His grace to those who dare not believe that they are called and elect, but who yet pray every hour:

"Truth, Lord," and "Have mercy upon us."