

THE BURNING BUSH

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THE STRUGGLE OF PRAYER

Reflection on the Canaanite Woman (Mt. 15:21-28)

Fr. John Konkle

Prayer is a struggle. I do not mean that it is a struggle to get ourselves to pray, though that is also true. We struggle to rise out of bed for morning prayers, to stay up at night to thank God for the blessings of the day, to detach ourselves from the easy chair, the TV or the internet, to combat our spiritual lethargy, to bring our mind back from distractions to the prayers we are uttering. All these are struggles, and common ones, but they are not the struggle of *praying*. They are the struggles of getting ourselves to pray.

In today's Gospel reading, the Canaanite woman does not have any trouble getting herself to pray. This is not her struggle. She is praying, crying out to Jesus, loudly and relentlessly: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon" (Mt 15:22). The disciples are so annoyed with her that they ask Jesus to heal her. This woman is engaged in a struggle of quite a different kind, *the struggle of praying*.

In the case of struggling to get ourselves to pray we are struggling *with ourselves*. We are fighting our passions: our laziness, our gluttony, our anger, our vainglory. The Canaanite woman is engaged in a struggle, not with herself, but with Jesus. He is ignoring her and she is not letting Him get away with it. Maybe we think this strange, but it is ubiquitous in the Psalms.

O LORD,...Give ear to my voice when I call to You! (Ps 140:1)

Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to You. (Ps 27:2)
I say to God, my rock: "Why have You forgotten me?" (Ps 41:10)

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, and You do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. (Ps 21:2-3)

The psalmist is frequently feeling that God is not listening, not responding; that he is being ignored, just as the Canaanite woman was being ignored. The struggle in which she and the psalmist are involved is not a struggle with themselves, but a struggle with God: Why don't You answer me, God? Don't You love me? Don't You care for me?

Elder Aimilianos boldly describes the life of prayer in a similar fashion:

[We] initially experience prayer, when we begin to pray, as a wrestling match, a struggle. ...I begin a battle which will be painful, which will be endless... a battle with God Himself... Let us suppose... that we have begun to pray, and I feel that I am engaged in this fearful wrestling match with God, that I have entered the fray, and that I have gloved up and begun to strike God. He defends Himself, dodges and resists. I do too, and the question now is whether I will be the winner or Him. The only options for me are to be knocked down, covered in blood, or to beat Him, and hear Him say to me: “Now you’ve won.” In other words, that He will surrender Himself to me, as He did to all the saints, who did whatever they wanted with God. If I stop, I will be a broken man, forever a failure. I cannot say that I am working, living, or praying, unless I win this fight. (“*On Prayer*,” Elder Aimilianos, *The Church at Prayer*, Sebastian Press, 2012)

Don’t these words sound preposterous, even scandalous—that prayer is a battle with God, and even more so, that we have to win this battle, lest we be forever a failure? We must defeat Him? Is this what prayer is, defeating God?

Elder Aimilianos has in mind patriarch Jacob’s wrestling with God in Genesis 32 as a template for prayer (emphasis added throughout the quotes below):

Jacob arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. *And Jacob was left alone.* (vv. 22-24)

Critical to our prayer life, to our struggle with God, is to be *alone* with Him. We must be detached, as the ascetic fathers so often remind us, from every worldly concern in order to engage in this struggle of prayer. We must enter the prayer closet and close the door to all distracting influences in order to be in a position to experience the penetrating gaze of our heavenly Father (Mt 6:5-7).

And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. (v.24)

The “man” with whom Jacob wrestled, as we will see below, is God Himself, a pre-incarnate manifestation of Christ. Our wrestling match with God typically occurs at night, in keeping vigil or watch, as the Scriptures call it. Jesus Himself struggled in prayer at night: “And being in agony

(ἀγωνᾶ), he prayed more earnestly (ἐκτενέστερο). Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Lk 22:44). ἀγωνᾶ is a contest, a struggle for victory and is often used for rigorous gymnastic exercise. Ἐκτενής expresses notions like straining, extending: earnestness, zealousness. Praying at night intensifies our aloneness, our separation from the things of this world, our fragility and vulnerability, our engagement with the hostility within us. (See also: Mt 14-23-45; Mk1:35; Lk 6:12; Heb 5:7; cf. St Paul, Acts 16:25.) Night, of course, is not the only context in which the struggle prayer occurs—the Canaanite woman is struggling with Christ in the daytime, but even in the light of day her life is immersed in such extreme darkness that she is completely blind to the world around her—except to Christ with whom she is wrestling.

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket and *Jacob’s hip was put out of joint* as he wrestled with him. (v.25)

Jacob was wounded in this fight, but not defeated. So, too, the Canaanite woman is wounded, but with words: “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs” (Mt 15:26). “Dogs” was a derogatory term the Jews used for the gentiles. The Canaanite woman was locked in a battle with God Himself every bit as much as Jacob had been, and she was receiving the blows of being ignored and belittled by the God of all, by her Creator. She is wounded, but not deterred. It is essential that we be wounded by God if we are ever to defeat Him, for it is precisely by those wounds that we are freed from the constraints that hinder our prayer.

Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” (v. 26)

Jacob prevailed in this wrestling match, but he did not yet received what he wanted: a blessing. After wrestling the entire night, he would not rest until he received what he wanted. Victory is not obtained until we have what we want.

And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but *Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.*” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is that you ask my name?” (vv. 27-29)

Here we have a revelatory interlude. Jacob has not yet received what he wants, but he is given a name that discloses his combatant: God. “Israel” means “to prevail with God.” With what authority does this “man” grant Jacob a new name? What does it mean that he has striven *with God* and prevailed? Jacob wants to know, but he is not given an answer to these questions because prayer is a mystery. We battle with the One who loves us beyond measure and thus cannot be contained in any of our conceptual categories. He is simply the One who loves us so much that He is willing to be defeated by us.

And there He blessed him. (v. 29)

Jacob received what he wanted, a blessing. As Elder Aimilianos explained, Jacob heard God say, “Now you’ve won.” So, too, with the Canaanite woman; how does the contest end? “Let it be to you *as you desire*. And her daughter was healed from that very hour” (Mt 15:28; emphasis added). Jesus did not say, “your daughter is healed,” but rather, “Now you have won; you have defeated me; you can have what you want—what you have been fighting for.” The blessings of God, His replies to our requests, do not come until we have prevailed in continuous prayer. Only then do we hear the words, “Now you’ve won.”

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and my soul was saved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.(Gen 32:30-31)

Jacob does not have a name for his combatant, but he knows that he has seen God face to face, that the struggle was the deliverance of his own soul, and that he will forever be reminded of this transformative encounter by the wounds from the battle—his limp.

So, too, with the Canaanite woman. Jesus touched the hip of her soul so as to injure her with his distance and insults, to sear in her wounds of His presence, of His love, of their face to face encounter. And so it *always* is when struggling with God in prayer; it is always for the purification, healing, and salvation of our own soul. Whatever we want, what we relentlessly beseech God for, will be accompanied by the transformation of our own soul for, in this wrestling match, we will have experienced God face to face, and “we shall be like Him, *for we shall see Him as He is*” (1 Jn 3:2; emphasis added).

How did the Canaanite woman prevail? How did she conquer Christ and obtained what she longed for—the healing of her daughter? What was the response to Christ’s insult? “How dare you call me a dog. I am a human

being. I have the right to be treated with respect. How dare you speak that way to me.” No, not at all; this is our response, not hers; it makes sense to us; but her response scandalizes us: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (Mt 15:27). What profound humility! What great faith! Her love for her daughter was so all-consuming that nothing else mattered; she would endure anything to have her daughter healed. *Nothing* was going to defeat her—not even God Himself. She willingly emptied herself of every human dignity out of love for her daughter. Wounded by love, by love for her daughter, and all the more so by Christ’s paradoxical love for her (Song of Solomon 2:5; 5:8).

In the course of this battle we learn to go deeper into our own soul, to set aside every extraneous care, to focus solely on what matters. This is how prayer is when we cry out to God from the depths of our hearts. “Deep calls call out to the deep” (Ps 41:8). And again, “Out of the depths I cried to you, Lord; O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!” The depth within us calls upon the depths of God Himself. There is no shallowness in God, and He looks to take us into the depths of our own hearts for communion—a face to face encounter that cannot occur in shallow waters. Elder Aimilianos describes it beautifully:

What is important is that we bring forth prayer from out of the depths. The one who strives to pray will understand these things and distinguish between them: he will know when he speaks with his mouth, when with the heart—or with the spirit, because, in the end, it is not the heart which should speak, but the spirit in the heart. Little by little he becomes aware of these things, he distinguishes between them, he learns them. Just as I am able to recognize you because I have seen you so often, the same thing happens here. The lips move, or they may not move at all. What matters is that a cry should come forth from the depths which, like a loud roar, like an earthquake, will shake the heavens and finally force God to answer, and to say, “Why do you cry to me?” (Ex 14, 15). (“On prayer,” emphasis added.)

The innermost abyss of our hearts calls out to the very depths of God. The depths are *downward, to a place of lowliness, a place of humility. We defeat God by becoming humble—or rather by being humbled.* 1Pt 5:6 is typically translated, “*Humble yourselves* under the mighty hand of God...,” but it would be more accurately translated, “*Let yourselves be humbled* under the mighty hand of God.” Being humble is not something we do ourselves—that would be to obtain it by pride. It is, rather, cultivated in us

as we allow ourselves to be humbled by God, wounded by Him out of His great love for us, in the midst of the struggle.

In this state of humility, in the depths of our own soul, we come to the place where He is, where He has been waiting for us all along; we are finally with Him:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and *humble in heart*, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Mt 11:28-30; emphasis added.)

“I am humble of heart.” He will not be defeated by our pride. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1Pt 5:5; Jam 4:6). He will not come to where we are in our self-importance, our arrogance, our self-assured piety, our clever comments, our insightful guidance; He will, however, patiently wait for us—in silence and in insults and in trials—until we *descend* into the abyss of our own hearts; until we lay aside everything that makes us anything in the eyes of this world, in our own eyes; until we have totally emptied ourselves and become nothing but the slave of all—humbled under His mighty hand, for this place of humility is *where* He is; indeed, it is *who* He is (Phil 2:5ff). And when we are where He is, there we will defeat Him; then, and only then, He will grant us whatever we desire just as He said to the Canaanite woman: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you *as you desire*.” ■

**FIVE YEAR MEMORIAL FOR
FR. ROMAN BRAGA
SATURDAY 2 May 2020**

Hierarchal Divine Liturgy starting at 9:00 am.

The memorial service will follow immediately.
A memorial meal will be served. All are invited.

We ask those who plan on attending to call or e-mail the monastery.



ICONOGRAPHY CLASS 2020

June 20th to June 27th

For details and inquiries send e-mail to:
iconclass@dormitionmonastery.org

THE VICTORY OF THE CROSS

Fr., Prof. Dumitru Staniloae

The cross imprinted on the gift of the world

The world is a gift of God, but the destiny of this gift is to unite man with God Who has given it. The intention of the gift is that in itself it should be continually transcended. When we receive a gift from somebody we should look primarily towards the person who has given it and not keep our eyes fixed on the gift. But often the person who receives the gift becomes so attached to the gift that he forgets who has given it to him. But God demands an unconditional love from us for He is infinitely greater than any of the gifts He gives us; just as at the human level the person who gives us a gift is incomparably more important than the gift which he has given and should be loved for himself and not only on account of his gift. In this way every gift requires a certain cross, and this cross is meant to show us that all these gifts are not the last and final reality. This cross consists in an alteration in the gift, and sometimes even in its entire loss.

We can see many meanings in this cross which is imprinted on the gift of the world which God gives us. Maximus the Confessor said that: "all the realities which we perceive with the senses demand the cross;" and "all the realities we understand with our mind have need of the tomb." To these words of St. Maximus we can add this: that man in his fallen condition feels the dissolution of the present world and of his own existence as a pain, a suffering; feels it as a sorrow because he has bound the affections which form part of his very being to the image of this world which is passing away. This attachment to the things of this world is felt particularly strongly by those who do not believe that there is any further transformation of this world after the life which we now know.

The Christian, however, carries this cross of the world and of his own existence not only more easily but with a certain joy, for he knows that after this cross there follows an imperishable life. With this faith he sees the world as crucified and dead to him, and he and all his tendencies as crucified and dead to the present world. This does not mean that he is not active in this world, and that he does not exercise his responsibility towards it; but he works to develop in the present state of the world, destined as it is to dissolution and death, the germs, the seeds of its future resurrection. He longs that this world and his own existence in it, may be crucified as Christ was crucified; that is to say he wishes voluntarily to undergo the suffering of the cross with the hope of resurrection into a higher world, an imperishable world, a resurrection which is truly with and in Christ.

The Christian does not see the transitory nature of the structures of this world and of his own existence as leading towards a crucifixion without

hope, or as moving towards a definitive and final death. He sees this situation and he lives it, anticipating the crucifixion at its end with hope, the hope of a higher and unchanging life.

However, it is not only the Christian who lives his own life and that of the world in anticipation of their crucifixion, lives them as nailed to the cross of the passing away of their present form; everyone inevitably does so. For everyone knows that those we love will die, and this certainty introduces a sorrow into the joy of our communion with them. Everyone knows that the material goods which one accumulates are transitory, and this knowledge casts a shadow on the pleasures one has in them. In this sense, the world and our own existence in it are a cross which we shall carry until the end of our earthly life. Never can man rejoice wholly in the gifts, the good things, and in the persons of this world. We feel the transitory nature of this world as a continual cross. But Christians can live this cross with the hope of the resurrection, and thus with joy, while those who have no faith must live this experience with increasing sadness, with the feeling that existence is without meaning, and with a certain despair which they cannot altogether alleviate.

Our responsibility towards those who are near to us forms the weight of a particularly heavy and painful cross on account of the fragility of their life which is exposed to a multitude of ills, a multitude of difficulties which arise from the conditions of this world in its present state. Parents suffer intensely and very frequently because of the ills and difficulties of their children; they fear for their life, for their future, for their sufferings. Therefore the life of parents becomes a life of continual concern, and a cross of the children is their cross. Our cross becomes heavier with the weight of the cross of those with whom we come in contact, for we share responsibility for the life of our children, our relatives, our friends, and even of all men with whom, in one way or another, we are in touch. We bear responsibility for all that can threaten the life of those for whom we have care, and have the obligation, as far as we can, of smoothing their difficulties and helping their lives. Thus we can reveal and strengthen our love for them and their love for us; thus we can develop the seeds of a future life in strengthening our and their spiritual existence. In this responsibility towards our neighbor we live more intensely our responsibility towards God. Christ has shown this meaning of His cross, He Who had pity on those who were suffering and wept for those who were dead. ■

(Fr. Dumitru Staniloae,(1903-1993) one of the best known Christian theologians of the second half of the 20th century, was professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Theological Institute in Bucharest, Romania. The present article is an excerpt from a talk given in Oxford in 1970 at the Convent of the Incarnation.)

**HOLY WEEK / PASCHA / BRIGHT WEEK
SCHEDULE OF SERVICES - 2016**

Sat., April 11 (Lazarus Saturday)
Holy Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom— 9:00am
Vigil — 6:00 pm
Sun., April 12 (Palm Sunday): Holy Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom —
10:00am
Bridegroom Matins — 7:00 pm

Holy Week

Mon., April 13: Presanctified Holy Liturgy — app. 9:30 am
Bridegroom Matins — 7:00 pm
Tues., April 14: Presanctified Holy Liturgy — app. 9:30 am
Bridegroom Matins — 7:00 pm
Wed., April 15: Presanctified Holy Liturgy — app. 9:30 am
Holy Unction — 2:00 pm
Bridegroom Matins — 7:00 pm
Thurs., April 16: 1st Hr., 3rd Hr., 6th Hr., 9th Hr., Typica, Vespers Liturgy of
St. Basil — 9:00 am
Matins with Passion Gospel — 7:00 pm
Fri., April 17: Royal Hours and placing of the Shroud in the Tomb — 10:00 am
Lamentations — 7:00 pm
Sat., April 18: 1 st Hr., 3rd Hr., 6th Hr., 9th Hr., Typica, Vespers Liturgy of
St. Basil — 9:00 am

**Resurrectional Matins and Paschal Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom -11:30pm
Paschal meal to follow — all are invited to partake.**

Sunday, April 19- PASCHA: Paschal Vespers — 1:00 pm

Bright Week

Mon., April 20: Matins — 9:00 am followed by Holy Liturgy (app. 10:00am)
and procession to the cemetery. Lunch will follow.
Tues., April 21: Matins — 8:00 am followed by Holy Liturgy (app. 9:00 am).
Lunch will follow.
Wed. April 23: Great Vespers for Feast of St. George — 5:00 pm.
Thurs., April 23: Matins — 7:30 am followed by Holy Liturgy: 9:00 am.
Great Vespers of the Feast (Lifegiving Fount) — 5:00pm.
Fri., April 24: Feast of the Lifegiving Fount - services in English: Matins —
8:30am followed by Holy Liturgy (app. 10:00 am) and Small Blessing of the
Water. Lunch — 12:00 noon.

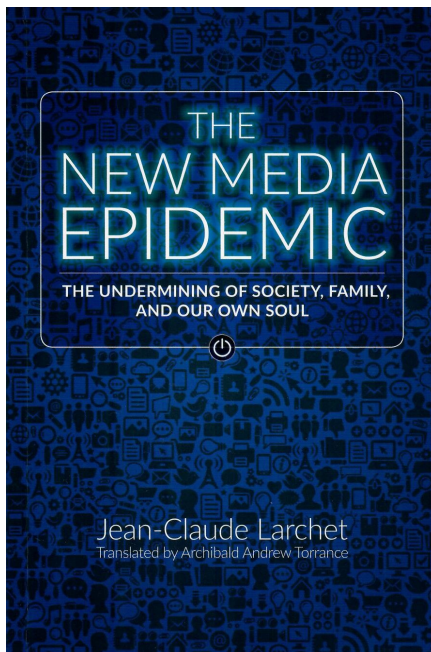
Sat., April 25: Resurrectional Matins — 9:00 am

Divine Liturgy — 10:00 am
Lunch — 12:00 noon
Sun., April 26: (Sunday of St. Thomas): Akathist, 3rd Hr., 6th Hr., — 9:00 am
Holy Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom — 10:00 am
Procession to the cemetery and blessing of the graves after lunch.

SUGGESTED READING

The media revolution, with its own advantages and disadvantages has become so prevalent in all the avenues of our life that it has “profoundly changed the life of modern man.” In this book *The New Media Epidemic*” the author explains the extent of these new means of communication—television, Internet, smart phones—and how invasive they have become into our lives and what are the negative effects they produce in our own lives, the lives of our children, and all close to us. These negative effects are physical, social, psychological, spiritual. The author cautions that because these effects are so subtle and sometimes difficult to notice, we must be vigilant in evaluating them, in learning to use them, and limit their use because they are capable of creating pathologies that can have serious and long lasting effects.

The book is published by the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, NY and is available for sale in the giftshop of our monastery or directly from the Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville. Price: \$ 20.00 plus S&H. (Michigan residents please add 6% tax).



SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

In an effort to respond to the outbreak of the Covid 19 disease, with prayer for discernment and much thought, we have decided it is in the best interest of everyone that the monastery closes and remains closed until the pandemic is lifted. Specifically:

- * All Lenten Retreats and other scheduled events have been canceled until further notice.
- * We will not be receiving overnight guests in the guesthouse.
- * In place of attending the Monastery's services, we request that you attend services in your own parish, in accordance with the guidelines followed in that community.
- * Those who confess with Fr. John should contact him directly for arrangements.

In spite of these restrictions, we wish to assure you that our life of prayer here not only remains unchanged but will be increased with special prayers and petitions for all suffering from this pandemic. We will continue to pray for all who request prayers for themselves, loved ones, and the departed in our unction and memorial services. Please email prayer requests to the Monastery. We are also hoping to stream online Liturgies and some other services, in the near future, and will announce that when they become available.

We understand the disappointments this decision will cause for everyone, and we assure you it is a great disappointment for us here, especially at this time of year when we all prepare for and look forward to the Resurrection of our Lord. We would like to stay in touch with you the best we can, and we will make every effort to keep our communications as timely as possible. We will also update our website (www.dormitionmonastery.org) with additional information as circumstances change in the weeks ahead.

“Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation (Mt 26:41), looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Tit 2:3).

Assuring you of our prayers, and asking for yours,
Mother Gabriella and the Sisterhood.