
²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'
²³ But He did not answer her at all. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'
²⁴ He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'
²⁵ But she came and knelt before Him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'
²⁶ He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'
²⁷ She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'
²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15:22-28

"Hey. I haven't seen you for a while, and almost didn't recognise you. You've gotten so fat." How would you feel if someone greeted you like this? Would you have the wit to perhaps respond, "Well, I wish had put on even more weight so you would not have recognised me!"

What is the worst insult you have received? Sometimes we receive insults faint forms of praise that are also like an insult: "You're so brave. I could never do that" (ie: "I think you're stupid"); "I love how you just don't seem to care what you say" (ie: "I think you're rude sometimes"). "You've done such a good job with that" (ie: "I really don't think you usually do a good job); "You look so good in that outfit" (ie: "I think that most of the time you were ugly clothes") etc.... Now, how would you feel if someone called you a 'dog'?

In our Holy Gospel this day (Matthew 15:21-28) we have the account of Jesus travelling in our near 'Gentile Territory'. There is some debate as to where Jesus actually is... The Bible says Jesus went "to the district of Tyre and Sidon", and the 'to' could be understood as 'towards' or 'into'. Whatever the case, Jesus is on the 'fringes'. He had had a discussion with 'Pharisees' about what makes a person 'unclean', and had noted that "The things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them" (Matthew 15:18). And, as Jesus is at this stage seeming to travel further and further from Jerusalem, He encounters a woman who cried out for help. We know this story very well, and how it ends with that word from Jesus, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And then we have that fascinating word (which seems to suggest that after this there was an on-going relationship somewhere with the disciples), "And her daughter was healed instantly."

This woman who met Jesus is of non-Jewish origin. In fact, she is described as a 'Canaanite'. (Of course, at this time the land of 'Canna' had officially ceased to exist. But Matthew describes her 'Canaanite woman' to emphasise she had come from the Jews traditional 'enemies'). And so, this Canaanite woman was considered as 'not acceptable' by the Jews. She was from the people who had again and again tried to wipe out the people of God. Also, from Jewish eyes - she really doesn't know God's law. So how could anyone talk to a person like this?

Here is this woman, possibly only having this one daughter, talking to one who seen as a traditional 'enemy' – and why – because her daughter was sick.

Somehow, and we don't really know how, this woman had heard of Jesus. And it was her hope that Jesus would heal her troubled daughter. But what does Jesus do? He seems to ignore her! Jesus seems to ignore her – and not only once, but twice!

But along the way an interesting conversation develops. Jesus says, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' Some Bible scholars have sought to soften the impact of Jesus' words about 'dogs' by suggesting that the Greek word here (*kunariois*) refers to "little house dogs'. But really, this does little to lessen the offensiveness in Jesus' words. Canaanites were Gentiles. As such, their entire group was considered unclean. 'Good people' shouldn't associate with 'the bad'. And so Jesus doesn't appear to communicate with this woman who comes from 'the enemy'.

But the woman persists. She recognises that there is more to Jesus than what He had just said. Perhaps the tone in His voice made her realise there was something more. And so she says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' And then it is that Jesus finally speaks with her.

Where was the turning point in this passage? The woman did not get her needs met by espousing good theology (that Jesus is the Son of David - a greater confession than any of the disciples had made to this point). Nor did her acknowledgment of 'Jesus as Lord' get through. These are important cries of 'the Faith'. But it was the woman's 'faith' that 'even dogs are permitted to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table' that made all the difference.

Only a person acquainted with the compassionate nature of the God would uttered this last cry. You see, the 'gods' of this world were not generally thought of as being compassionate. They were usually considered cold and uncaring. The many things that people of this world trust to give them joy and meaning in life don't really help when things go wrong. But the Canaanite woman's insistence that God was compassionate (who gives scraps even to 'the dogs') compelled Jesus to applaud her faith.

At the background to all this is the conversation Jesus had earlier about what makes a person 'clean' (that is, 'holy' and 'acceptable' in God's sight – see rest of Gospel for this day, Matthew 15:10-20). The Pharisees said it had to do with observing certain 'cleanliness laws'. But the disciples had not observed such 'laws' (because they aren't in the Bible anyway!). And yet they had observed these in practice by trying to get rid of this strange and persistent woman.

But Jesus' response is to say that it is not what goes in the mouth that makes us 'unclean' but what's in our heart. Jesus' word in Matthew 15:19 points out that by nature we all are sinful and unclean. By nature we don't deserve to *have* God listen to us. And Jesus practically demonstrated this when He not only ignored the woman's initial requests (He did not listen to her), but He also ignored the disciples' later request to get rid of her (He did not listen to them either).

There is an important theological question we all may consider at this point (at a personal level – not to ‘point the finger’ at someone else): What do we really *deserve* from God? Do we really deserve the rain or cars or happy, healthy homes and families? No, we don’t. We don’t even deserve crumbs from the table. Jesus says that our hearts are evil. The Pharisees (and even Jesus’ own disciples at that time) struggled to recognise this. But the woman did not reject this description. Instead, she fell on her knees (as a repentant sinner). She acknowledged she didn’t deserve the crumbs from the table. *And yet she asked for them anyway!!* And Jesus commends her for that faith which simply trusts in the goodness of God.

Over the years there have been many great movies made, and many wonderful stories written. Have you thought what usually makes a movie or novel ‘successful’ (that is, a ‘hit’ or a ‘best-seller’)? Usually, these are stories with some sort of ‘happy’ or ‘good’ ending. Not everyone may necessarily live ‘happily ever after’, but good usually triumphs, and people are taught (or encouraged) by some moral lesson. Usually these ‘hits’ or ‘best-sellers’ are ones that give us ‘hope’ in some way.

We all need some sense of ‘hope’ in life. Hope is related to a sense of ‘worth’ and ‘purpose’, and in many ways is the source of these things. Without hope we will struggle in life, and we will struggle in relationships. Without hope it is difficult to get up into the morning and to face each day. Without ‘hope’ we may fall into despair. Now despair is not the same as depression. A person who has feelings of being depressed is not one necessarily who has given up hope. A person feeling depressed still may have hope that one day everything will feel alright again.

The story of the Canaanite woman is a wonderful story of hope. Here is a woman (remember, this is a woman 2,000 years ago, who wasn’t meant to approach men in public) – here is a woman who comes to Jesus with a request to help her sick and troubled daughter. She is ultimately lifted up by the word of Christ.

When it comes to considering what makes our life happy we can praise God for the rain, our sports, and times of happy homes and families. But the great gift that God gives us is love and that word of forgiveness when we don’t deserve it at all. That’s the most important gift of all. This is something we don’t deserve it. But when you think about it – that’s what love and forgiveness really is! It is something you don’t deserve but receive as a gift.

There are times in our lives when we feel like people around us don’t really care. And at times it may seem God does not care. But He does. Jesus gives love and healing to broken hearts. Jesus gives love and acceptance to broken lives. Jesus gives love and forgiveness through His very own body broken for us all.

God knows our lives. God knows our troubled. God knows where we feel no hope at all. And He knows your innermost thoughts and desires. He knows what has broken your heart. And He knows how each of us has broken the hearts of others. Yet He still says, ‘Come’. In Jesus we receive that gift of grace that says no matter who you are, or what you have done, God has love and compassion for you. God has not overlooked you.

All this also hints at an extra dimension to this passage today, and it has to do with Holy Communion. When we come to 'the Lord's Table' we receive from that body that was broken for us all. Here is Jesus.

God brings healing to broken lives. Just as the Canaanite's daughter was healed so God brings His wonderful gift of healing forgiveness in Jesus. So may you - in your homes and families, in our church and congregation, and as you step out into our world (which at times can feel cold and uncaring) –rejoice in that life, love, forgiveness, healing and hope God gives in Jesus. Celebrate in His life and love always. Amen.