

Forced Mind Changing (Matthew 15:21-28)

10:00am Trinity 10 – 20th August 2017

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.' 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.' 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.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food 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, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

<Prayer>

The world's most stupid man dies and goes to Heaven. The gatekeeper of Heaven says, "Heaven is getting too full, so you have to pass this quiz before you can get in. Here comes the first question: which two days of the week begin with T?"

The guy thinks and replies, "That's easy. Today and tomorrow." The gatekeeper says, "OK, I'll give it to you. Second question: how many seconds are there in a year?"

The stupid guy says, "Twelve: January 2nd, February 2nd..." The gatekeeper says, "OK, OK, I'll give it to you.

Last question: what is God's first name?" The stupid guy replies, "Howard."

The gatekeeper asks, "How on earth did you get Howard?" The guy says, "Well, it's right there in the Lord's prayer: Our father, who art in heaven, Howard be thy name."

So, what are the entrance requirements for the Christian faith? How can you qualify? This passage from Matthew today, speaks to that question: it's the story of the Canaanite woman. Try to picture the scene as I go over the structure of the story.

<pause>

Now, the regions of **Tyre and Sidon** lie to the north of Israel, and they were once part of the territory of Israel. However, by Jesus's time it was a pagan area of Phoenician culture. Evidently **Jesus' reputation** for teaching and miracles had travelled north before him, and it seems this desperate Canaanite woman in the story was aware of him.

She ingratiates Jesus with the titles of **Lord** and **Son of David** in her persistent requests for help. That is both an act of respect and an act of faith on her part, and it's one of the reasons why Matthew tells us this story in the first place. It is as if to say: **even the pagans can clearly see that here is one from the true and only God.**

The woman's sick **daughter** is not actually present but is mentioned as **having a demon**. That was a catch-all description for a whole range of possible afflictions that we have since understood in psychiatry. It might seem primitive to us, but for this mother it's the reason why she **acts in faith** to try and find some cure.

So, her only means of trying to get Jesus's attention is to **shout at him repeatedly**. This is rather understated way of saying that this woman just would not stop *going on-and-on*. She filled the air with her persistence, so much so, that the disciples urged Jesus to deal with her – '**Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.**' After all she is merely a pagan woman, and of course (so they thought) Jesus wouldn't go near her. Telling her to go away! **Or to put it, breaking any hope she had to be there.**

Indeed, Jesus does not respond to the woman at all. He addresses the disciples: '**I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**' This seems rather harsh, to us, and uncharacteristic of Jesus to make such a distinction. In fact, this whole story rather confuses our picture of Jesus. **I struggle with it.**

But the woman hears this comment of Jesus to his disciples, and now, thinking she is about to be rejected, **approaches Jesus directly and kneels before him**, stopping him in his tracks and forcing him to respond *to her* – he can't get away now. It is a most desperate plea - '**Lord, help me.**' Jesus is trapped.

He answers, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' I remain amazed at Jesus's response – and I wonder if he was he having a bad day? When I consulted a few books on this passage I found them all confused about what Jesus was thinking. He may well have been the Messiah – the Saviour of the people of Israel, but his contrary response is breathtaking, and embarrassing. And everybody understood what he meant – in the pecking order she is nothing more than the dog under the table. **A sharp intake of breath – *did Jesus really just say that?***

<The central point is on the woman, not Jesus>

Yet, this woman is undaunted in her reply. **She accepts the insult and counters it back to Jesus in his own words.** She said, 'Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'

So, Jesus the ultimate debater who regularly minces-up the great teachers of Israel is here detained and stunned by this determined pagan mother. There is no smart answer from Jesus now, he is completely owned by this woman and is left with only one response: 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly. It seems as if Jesus has his mind an attitude changed here. I hope disciples were equally changed. **I hope we can still keep open the possibility of having our minds changed too.**

<We are all so easily branded and labelled>

- Native or Migrant
- Left or Right
- Brexit or Remainer (remember that?)
- Scones or scones

Sadly, we can all be categorized in some way to the judgement of others.

<pause>

An obvious question arises from our gospel today: Are these blessings of Jesus repeatable? Can a person, not a member of the recognized group or culture: i.e. not part of what we know as ‘Christians and the Church’, yet still seek such blessings from God? **In equivalent terms, could a Muslim extremist have knelt there before Jesus in desperation?**

We as faithful Christians, regular in confession and seeking God’s salvation weekly, we who try to live out our faith constantly: **we can be sure that God will hear our prayers. That is not a matter of your rights or status, but it is (only) a matter of faith.**

But what of those who have no prior investment in the Christian faith, until calamity strikes? Is our faith cheapened if someone suddenly calls upon Christ, all in a day, and just because of some instant need? Is that unfair? Well, in our natural economy we might think so if we hold faith as a currency from which we can later procure God’s blessings. **I must warn you against that mindset.**

One thing must surely be true: faith alone is enough to make a person fall before God. I have seen myself some desperate reasons for people to seek God’s face *immediately*. Such awful situations as losing a child, or suicide. I’ve watched recently as marriages have fallen apart, redundancies have hit, and illnesses diagnosed from which people know they will not recover – all within the boundaries of this parish, and in this year. Many of us have seen and know these things ourselves, and sometimes they are very close to home. You may yourself have known people who had no claim upon God’s love, but who also found they had no other hope than God in a time of crisis. **Would Christ turn such people away if they are not carrying the right cards? Would we not wish to help and pray for them? Would we turn them away?**

Consider the alternative. Just suppose that Jesus did get the chance to send the Canaanite woman away. What might he have said to get rid of her? Perhaps:

- Go away, you are not a Jew, or a child of Israel.
- Go away, you are only a woman.
- Go away, someone else is responsible for you.

If we are shocked that Jesus might help a person who otherwise has nothing to do with him, then would we not be even more shocked to hear Jesus say these things? These are all terrible responses to make, and she will just keep going and going in her request. Look what faith alone achieved for this desperate mother.

God will always listen to those who earnestly seek him, regardless of anything, as long as faith is present. Faith always beings from somewhere.

Jesus did not heal the world by travelling the world, and yet we have a world full of many troubles such as this sick daughter. Jesus has ascended and it is we who occupy the world with our divisions. **We must hold open the chance of radical change if we seek to be fully like Jesus (and we should be doing).**

Amen