

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Isaiah 56:1, 67

Psalms 66

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

This is a fascinating Gospel passage we've just heard. At first glance (and through 21st century eyes) it can seem that Jesus has been rather rude to the Canaanite woman. But there's a lot more going on under the surface here than first meets the eye.

So first of all, we're told that Jesus has taken the disciples to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This was a pagan territory, north-west of Galilee – so he knows that they're going to have run-ins with non-Jews. In fact, it's almost as though he was seeking such encounters so as to make a point. And so it was that Jesus was approached by a Canaanite woman in great distress, who pleaded with him to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon. So we see right away that the woman is motivated by love for her suffering daughter. Coming from a place of love is always a good start.

And the way that the woman addresses Jesus is noteworthy too. Despite not being Jewish, she calls him "Son of David," and a little later even calls him "Lord". *Son of David* was a Messianic term, used by Jews to indicate their belief that Jesus was the Christ, the anointed king of Israel foretold by the prophets – the spiritual—and literal—successor to the great King David. So already we see a sign of the depth of the woman's faith in Jesus.

However, despite her initial cries for help, Jesus at first seems uninterested. Indeed, she is being so persistent that the disciples start asking Jesus to help her, just so that she will leave them alone. This calls to mind the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge, where the widow's persistence wore down the unjust judge who eventually gave in to her demand for justice.

Jesus' seeming lack of sympathy at first probably strikes us as a bit disconcerting, as though he doesn't really care about this suffering woman. But Saint Augustine once offered a very important insight into what might really be going on here. He said:

"Christ showed himself indifferent to her, not in order to refuse her his mercy but rather to inflame her desire for it."

Jesus was not refusing her his mercy, but *inflaming her desire* for it.

Those of you who are parents would know the importance of instilling the virtue of delayed gratification in your children. If you always give them everything they want *as soon as they want it*, it's a recipe for trouble. They can come to expect their every whim to be met on demand, and they don't learn the fact that many of the most worthwhile things in life require long-patience and much hard work to achieve.

The same lesson applies in the life of faith. If we get upset every time God doesn't give us what we ask for as soon as we ask for it, it shows we've still got a few things to learn. For instance, we could probably do with a reminder of just how inadequate our perspective and judgement is compared to God's. Maybe we're asking for the wrong thing, or maybe the time isn't right. Or maybe we are asking for something worthwhile, but we're too lukewarm – we don't want it bad enough to see it through when the going gets tough.

Jesus' approach here helps explain what is often happening when we experience times of dryness in our prayer – when it feels like God is absent and nothing is happening. Very often, early in our walk with God, we are given significant spiritual experiences which help to bolster our small faith and move us forward in faith. Most of us need such experiences early on to help us take the life of prayer seriously.

And yet it is not uncommon for such spiritual fireworks to be lessened or even removed as time goes on. This can be a disconcerting thing, because it can feel as though God has abandoned us. And yet, as so many of the saints have described, such a period of spiritual purgation is often God's way of drawing us into a deeper relationship with him. After all, if we're praying just because of the spiritual warm-fuzzies we get, we're not really doing it for the love of God – we're doing it for what we get out of it. And so God has to take us deeper, so that we really begin to grow in love for him, even if prayer seems largely uneventful much of the time.

It's a bit like a marriage. There's a reason we start with a honeymoon – it's wonderful, and there's plenty of fireworks, and it helps bolster the couple's love for each other. But there's also a reason why the honeymoon can't last forever. Eventually the couple has to move past the initial excitement, and begin the hard work of really growing in love for the other person, regardless of what they get out of it in return.

So in a sense you could say that Jesus is training the Canaanite woman. By coming across as indifferent, it makes her faith go even deeper, to the point that she is willing to risk it all for the sake of her daughter.

Jesus notes that his mission is first of all for the House of Israel, and that it would not be fair to "take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs." "Dog" was a derogatory term commonly used by Jews for their pagan neighbours, given that both were ritually unclean according to the Mosaic Law. But the woman is undeterred, and boldly answers with humility and wit, noting that even house dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master's table.

Now don't forget, first century Palestine was a very patriarchal society. For a pagan woman to speak to a Rabbi like that—answering back and correcting him—would have been highly scandalous to some. But Jesus not only allows it, he goes on to commend this non-Jewish woman for her faith and grants her request. We can see

that a new world is dawning, one in which all people—Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free—become one in dignity through their incorporation into Christ.

The Canaanite woman's request for mere crumbs recalls the faith of the Centurion, who affirmed that Jesus did not have to bother coming to his house to cure his servant, simply saying the word would be sufficient. It also calls to mind the faith of the woman with a blood complaint, who believed that she only had to touch the hem of Jesus' robe in order to be cured. Each instance was essentially an affirmation of the immensity of Jesus' power—such that a small gesture from him was sufficient for the miracle they were seeking—and by extension, such an affirmation of his power is an unspoken affirmation of Who He Is. This is why all three are said to show such great faith – because if they thought that Jesus was just an ordinary person, there would be no point in approaching him the way they did.

Jesus' eventual granting of the woman's request also calls to mind his first miracle at the wedding feast at Cana. Another woman of great faith—his Blessed Mother—had noted that the party had run out of wine, to which Jesus responded that his hour had not yet come. Mary simply turns to the stewards and says, "Do whatever he tells you," and the rest was history. So too in our Gospel today, Jesus is correct in noting that he had come first of all for the people of Israel. The time of the great mission to the Gentiles—of which we are all beneficiaries—was still to come. And yet, like Mary, this woman's great faith prompts Jesus to essentially move forward the timetable. It's as though, when he is presented with great faith, Jesus can't resist!

So a powerful lesson for us in all this is the value of perseverance in our faith.

- If someone is finding it difficult to pray, and it is taking a lot of effort to persevere and not give up – trust that it's worth it.
- If someone is in an irregular marriage situation and it will take time and effort to set things right with the Lord and his Church – trust that it's worth it.
- If someone is scandalised by the human failings of various people in the Church, and is finding it hard to persist in seeing Jesus at work in it all – trust that it's worth it.

Our difficulties in the life of faith may well be the Lord's way of training *us*, so that our faith goes deeper, and so that we will really be ready to receive the graces he has in store for us. So let us ask the Lord in this Mass to increase our faith, and to help us grow in love and trust of him, knowing that at the end of the day, the Lord wants to bless us with far more than our timid hearts dare to ask.