

Reflection for Pentecost 11 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Spend a moment or two reflecting on today's gospel reading the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter, and very quickly the issue of faith, the characteristics of faith, start to come into focus; a focus that challenges our faith.

First, let us place the story into the wider context of the gospel.

The bulk of Matthew's gospel stories take place in two areas - the region of Galilee, the lake, and the surrounding area; then moving towards Jerusalem. Jesus' ministry is very much one to his people, the Jews, and most of the recorded miracles are set in that context.

The difference with this story is that, to use one of the current buzz word, he takes a staycation. Jesus decides for whatever reason to take a break. He needed to recharge his batteries, both physically and spiritually, as we all do from time to time. To be able to do that he needs to go somewhere where he would not be recognised, somewhere in his terms that is quiet. He chooses the territory of Tyre & Sidon (modern-day Lebanon), which to the Jews of Jesus' day, would have been classed as unclean because of the number of gentiles who lived there.

Jesus' plan, though, to remain anonymous fails almost immediately. His reputation goes before him and a woman - a Canaanite or as the parallel account in Marks gospel describes her a Phoenician - gets to hear about Jesus' presence and searches him out. For Jesus and the disciples, she would have been viewed as a gentile.

What is her reason for coming to Jesus?

Her daughter is being tormented by a demon. Quite how modern doctors would describe the condition I am not sure, but it was obviously some form of mental illness. The woman decides she must take her chance; and she must act.

Here is the first pointer to faith in our gospel. Faith is not only about what goes on in our heads or our hearts; living faith is that which also affects our actions. She knew Jesus could heal her child, despite the fact she was a gentile - but the knowledge was in itself was not enough. She had to act on that faith. She had to seek out and find Jesus and make her request.

Our faith is the same, it needs to be more than head & heart knowledge. It needs to touch the very way we live. The way we use the gifts and resources God has given to each one of us. Not just be visible in our worship on a Sunday, but in every aspect of our lives. Living faith results in action.

On finding Jesus, the woman begs him for help, by driving out the unclean spirit.

You can almost imagine Jesus' reaction and body language. It's my day off I wanted time to be still, time to pray, and I am found by this gentile woman. Jesus appears tense and cross; *"he did not answer her at all"*. Its one of those few occasions during his ministry when his humanity breaks through - he is just like us.

After a brief interruption from the disciples who want her sent away His answer is sharp and rebuffing to the woman *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."* Or to put it another way, my mission is to God's chosen people the Jews first and only when that is done will I think about the gentiles. At this, the women's faith must have been tested to the limit. What was she to do? The simple solution - the one I suspect most of us would have opted for is to slip away quietly without another word. But not this woman. She comes back to Jesus *"Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

The women's reply highlights three things – firstly, that she understands who Jesus is. The word Lord indicates this. Secondly, that she perceives that Jesus is already feeding the Children - the people of Israel - and that in God's plan that must come first. But she is also aware that a crumb dropping from the table does not stop the course of the meal. Jesus can help her without deflecting himself from his main ministry. Thirdly, she claims no right to help or assistance; her hope, her faith, rests solely on God's grace. God's undeserved, but freely given gift.

Think of the pet dog, it does not deserve or even need, the scraps from your table, but those big brown eyes ... who can resist dropping the odd piece?

What the women can see is that the power of God is at work in and through Jesus and the healing she seeks for her daughter is linked to a faith response. A faith response that cannot demand anything or claim anything as of right, but a faith response that depends wholly and totally on God's grace.

The world in which we live so often makes things happen through technology and systems. It is a world too driven by the idea that you get nothing unless you earn it - at least in the long run. In such a world it is so easy to lose sight of the reality of grace; the reality of God's love freely given.

All we do in our lives by way of service to God is, or should be, simply a response to that love and grace. It is not payment for it.

In our story, Jesus is so moved by the women's faith that he says *"Woman, you have great faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly".*

This encounter between the woman and Jesus should challenge each of us to look at our faith. Asking how does it match up to hers. What are its foundations? How active is our faith and what place does grace play in our expectations of God? Can we say, as the woman did? *"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."*