

Reflection on Sunday 20 August 2023

by Adrian Walter, Lay Leader of Worship

(Readings: Psalm 133 & Matthew 15. 21-28)

Dogs under the table

In chapter 15 of Matthew's Gospel, we read the account of the healing of a Syrophenician woman's daughter.

Jesus had just been confronted by the Pharisees about why His disciples didn't observe the strict Jewish laws about handwashing before eating and, as usual, lambasted them for their hypocrisy because they used the same Jewish law to fraudulently keep wealth for themselves.

He explained his condemnation to the crowd but somehow, yet again, His disciples failed to understand it and told Him He'd really upset the pharisees. As the time for His death was rapidly nearing, and in order to ensure that everything that happened would be in accordance with the scriptures, Jesus retired north into Phoenicia, gentile country, where He knew the Pharisees would not follow Him, hoping to get some rest.

Mark's account says He did not want anyone to know He was there, but as soon as He arrives He is confronted by a local woman with a seriously ill daughter. Interestingly Mark tells us she was a Greek, born a bit further to the north, but

Matthew calls her a Canaanite which would put her in the lowest ethnic group as far as the Jews were concerned – more of that later.

She falls at Jesus' feet and begs for healing for her daughter. Jesus ignores her so she persists, and in doing so irritates the disciples, two of which had previously asked Jesus if they could call down fire from heaven on another group of disrespectful gentiles. Jesus tells the disciples that His mission was only to the lost Children of Israel.

When the woman continues to beg for her daughter's healing, Jesus makes the remarkable, and at first reading disturbingly racist, comment that it was not right to give the children's food to the dogs. The disciples would have approved because '*dogs*' was the common pejorative term for Samaritans... and pretty much all gentile groups. However, the actual word Jesus used was the diminutive form of dog – puppy – and I believe that Jesus was looking at the woman as He said it with no hint of antagonism on His face, possibly even a wry smile.

The woman, perhaps emboldened by this gentle insult, instantly retorts that it certainly is right as even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the children's table. And with that comment, she instantly walks into the history books as the only person recorded in scripture to have argued with Jesus and won! Jesus instantly commends her for her faith and heals her daughter.. instantly.

So, what can we draw out of this passage? What were the reasons this woman had her prayer answered? For a prayer for healing is effectively what it was.

First, she understood who Jesus was – she refers to Him as Jesus, Son of David, a term that indicated royal lineage and by implication, the Messiah, the Saviour. It's very easy to have an academic understanding of God as the all-powerful creator of time and space, but who doesn't become involved in the minutiae of His people's lives. This woman understood exactly who He was and because of that...

She asked in faith - she believed that Jesus could heal her daughter. It's easy to ask God for something because it seems like the right thing to do, but in your heart you think the request is hopeless so you mention it once or twice in passing. James tells us that, "When you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts ... should not expect to receive anything from the Lord." This woman had faith, bucket loads of it, and faith which extended to believing that Jesus could heal her daughter without even seeing her. As a result, she became one of only two people Jesus commended for their faith and both were gentiles.

She was persistent in her requests – Persistence pays. God knows that as human beings we tend to give up easily. Persistence goes hand in glove with knowing who God is and having complete faith in Him. Jesus deals with this in

the parable of the importunate widow (or unjust judge), where the implication is that instant answers are not always God's way, but persistence pays.

Linked closely with her faith and persistence was her willingness to argue with Jesus – The Bible contains many accounts of people who argued with God and, in some cases, God gave them what they wanted; probably the most notable was Moses in the wilderness. Don't be frightened to refuse to take no for an answer and keep talking to God – it's not disrespectful! He may be the all-powerful creator of time and space, but He listens to His children. He won't always answer in the way that we expect or in the way we want, but then Jesus Himself experienced that when He argued with His Father in Gethsemane.

And, lastly, she was not intimidated by her social standing or the objections of the disciples – Although the disciples didn't physically prevent her from approaching Jesus, they asked Him to send her away empty handed... effectively condemning her young daughter to a life of suffering. There was no grace, no compassion undoubtedly because "she is not like us". The disciples had written her off as unworthy of coming to Jesus based on her ethnicity and undoubtedly her gender but she, desperate to save her daughter, was undeterred and continued to press her case to the point where Jesus says, "For saying that you may go, your daughter is healed".

So don't be discouraged by others who may not share your



understanding of who God is or your faith in Him. However, it is an equally strong message for us not to put barriers in the way of others coming to Jesus to make their requests in their way. No one is outside the reach of God's grace.

So, what do we take away from all this? Well, when presenting our requests to God in prayer we need to understand who God is, that He can do more than we dare to ask, believing that He will answer our prayers. We need to be persistent in prayer, not letting God off the hook until we receive an answer and, even then, being prepared to argue our case, but having the grace to accept that the answer won't always be the one we wanted.