

## 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary time, 20<sup>th</sup> August 2023

As we read the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of S Matthew's Gospel we see that after Jesus had yet another run in with the Pharisees who had come from Jerusalem to scrutinize his actions and criticize his failure to follow the ceremonial traditions of the elders, he and his disciples withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon, two Mediterranean seaside villages northwest of the Sea of Galilee. S Matthew records one of two occasions when Jesus left Jewish territory and stepped into a foreign country. In S Mark's account of this event Jesus entered a house and did not want anyone to know it. He wanted to rest.

From a distance, a Canaanite woman saw, recognized and cried out to Jesus, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." We are told this in verse 22. Surprisingly, Jesus did not respond to her at all! With a faith that wouldn't give up, the Canaanite woman kept crying out to Jesus – to the point that his disciples begged him to "send her away!" They were getting embarrassed by her faith in what Jesus could do and by drawing attention to them.

It must have taken great courage for a woman to ask a man who was not a member of her family for help; not to mention that she was a Canaanite woman doing the asking. The Canaanites hated the Jews and were in turn hated by them. Jews referred to the Canaanites as dogs. In the verbal interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman Jesus went so far as to refer to the way in which Jews viewed Canaanites when he said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Throughout history there have been times when a colonising power has entered a country and treated the local, indigenous people in the same way. For us in New Zealand there

are strong parallels in the historic relations between Maori tangata whenua and the British manuhiri.

After some talking back and forth we are told that Jesus saw her faith, commended her, granted her request and completely healed her daughter “from that very hour.” There is a sense in which she overwhelmed him.

Jesus’ comment “Woman you have great faith!” was the turning point. She had broken through his silence, his belittling of her people, and challenged Jesus in her need. “Woman you have great faith. Be it done for you as you desire”. Her daughter was immediately cured. Hers was a great faith; one in which she had called Jesus “Lord”. Her faith caused her to come to Jesus on behalf of her daughter. Against all odds, even when it appeared that she was being ignored and even turned away, she trusted, believed and hoped in Jesus! Her tenacious faith kept hanging on to the hope that he would have mercy and help her; and he did!

Have you ever felt like you were at the end of your rope, and just barely hanging on? Perhaps you have a situation at work; with your health or that of a loved one; maybe your family – or one near you – is in crisis. Does it seem, at times, that God is ignoring you, or at least distant and unapproachable? A friend of mine used to ask, “Do you think God has gone on holiday?”

It is at times such as those I have given as examples that, against all odds, God calls us to trust, believe and hope in Jesus! We should believe that God does know, love, hear and provide for us in ways that are best for us. Chiefly, God shows mercy, grace and help for all people through the cross of Jesus – through his life-giving sacrifice for our forgiveness and the salvation of the entire world!

As we live out our faith through trials and testing, our faith grows.

A further point for us to think about in the week that lies ahead is that this incident changed the direction of Jesus' mission as seen in S Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus wasn't ignoring the Canaanite woman or lacking compassion toward her need. He was "setting the stage." This woman who was an "outsider" to the Jewish faith displayed more belief than the very people who were supposed to have been ready and waiting for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. In addition, the Canaanite woman's story prepared the way for the Gospel being preached to those outside the Jewish faith. She was a foreshadowing of the work God was planning to accomplish among the gentiles. The work of Jesus was no longer limited to the Jews but went beyond to non-Jews, called gentiles in the Scripture, as well. This was to have its outworking in the commission Jesus gave for his followers to "Go and make disciples of all nations..."

The learning for us to take away is: Be persistent, insistent and come to God with a sense of our own helplessness. Look for ways in which you can become part of God's mission to others. These will not necessarily be great and marvellous actions. More often than not, for most of us, it will be something small.

Let me give you a simple example: have you ever had the name, or an image, of a person pop unexpectedly into your mind. Turn that into a short prayer for that person. Maybe send them a short text. A couple of months ago the name of someone who was a member of the youth group I ran in a parish in Johannesburg, and who is now a priest in Australia popped into my mind. I

said a little prayer for him and then sent him a whatsapp message. I received an almost immediate reply saying that there was a situation he was dealing with and he appreciated the prayer.

So often through the years it has astounded me when I have gone through what I have been talking about how often I would find out that the prayer had obviously been answered in the life of the person being prayed for. The people being prayed for were built up by the short prayer and I have found that I have been built up by their answer. We should remember however that we should not expect an answer as our right.

There are many instances where we are called upon to rely on our faith in the love of God in Jesus. It is that faith which enables us to live out all that God expects of us. May God bless you in the week ahead as you experience God working through your faith.