

Jesus said, '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.

There are few – if any – portions of the Gospels which are more perplexing than this for those who seek to follow Jesus. The encounter with the Canaanite woman makes challenging reading. The apparent equation of non-Jews with dogs offends our senses and causes us to question the character of Jesus. Over the years I have read several scholarly attempts to explain away these words, but none is wholly satisfactory. Most recently, I have asked myself how I would portray this if, say I were making a film of the life of Jesus and what might I want to explore with the actor playing Jesus regarding what is going on inside our Lord? To reach any kind of worthwhile answer to that we need, I think, to take account of two things. Firstly, the context which Matthew gives us; what has been going on for Jesus in the lead-up to the encounter --- and – Secondly – our belief as Christians that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human, the emphasis here being on the fully human.

According to Matthew's narrative, the events preceding this encounter have placed heavy demands upon Jesus. He has been rejected in the synagogue of his own village of Nazareth. He has heard of the brutally violent murder of John, the Baptist at the hands of King Herod. He has found, when he tries to take time away from it all – that he is pursued, relentlessly by an enormous crowd desperate for healing and he has given himself over to that healing as well as to miraculously feeding the crowd with only a few loaves and fishes. After a short time alone, he has had to go to the disciples during the storm and to rescue Peter when his faith gave out. There follow more crowds and more demands for healing then yet another aggressive challenge from the Jewish authorities followed by yet more evidence that even those closest to him really don't get it ---- just cannot grasp the message: "Are you, also, still without understanding?"

It is – in the wake of all this that Jesus leaves Jewish territory and escapes into the region of Tyre and Sidon, Gentile territory. Perhaps there – surrounded by foreigners – he can escape

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the spotlight, avoid the pressing demands and have some time to think and pray; time to rest his exhausted and dispirited human self. But no! For even here there is demand. It is – we can reasonably surmise – an exhausted Jesus --- who responds to the women – and who uses the common colloquial habit – of equating non-Jews – such as her – with dogs. Struggling to hold onto his sense of mission and purpose; weighed down by all the demands made of him and by the opposition to him, afraid for his own safety in the light of Herod's murder of John, disillusioned at his apparent lack of success in training his disciples, how can he possibly also contemplate extending his mission beyond Israel!

In a dark place, then --- Jesus meets the Canaanite women— yet unexpectedly--- in her – he meets the light of faith – to bolster his flagging spirit.

Pause

Yesterday marked the 75th anniversary of VJ Day.

On 15th August 1945, following almost six years of armed conflict and the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Second World War came, effectively, to an end as the Japanese Empire surrendered to the Allied Forces.

The army of the British Empire and its allies which fought in the Far East was the Fourteenth Army; comprising men and women from across the world. Yesterday Africans; people of the sub-continent of India; Australians, New Zealanders, Gurkhas, Canadians, Americans and many more stopped with us in the United Kingdom and paid our respects. During the war and in its immediate aftermath the Fourteenth Army was known as The Forgotten Army, mainly because their needs for fresh recruits and supplies often took second place as priority was given to rescuing Europe from the Nazi regime. They were not forgotten yesterday and never should be.

On the War Memorial in the War Cemetery at Kohima in India, which was the site of a decisive battle to arrest the Japanese attempt to invade India, there are written these words:

When you go home tell them of us and say for your tomorrow, we gave our today.

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We have all been blessed, every day, to enjoy that tomorrow and we should never cease to honour those whose gift it is to us.

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But that said and sincerely meant, as we pause to remember VJ Day and all that it means, we must not ignore the fact that the root of so much that caused and sustained the World Wars of the 20th century was the arrogant and misguided folly of those European nations who embraced colonial ambition and who, in the 19th century particularly, vied with each other to build empires by ruthlessly misappropriating the homelands of others and with them, vast natural resources, wealth and power.

At precisely the same time as so many of the Church buildings in which we worship in Scotland were being built, lines were drawn on maps which not only ignored geography but much more importantly were entirely careless of the natural ethnic associations on the ground. The human stories of pain which flow from that will never fully be known or told. Just one major chapter in that colonialist story is the European rape of Africa which saw the enslaving of millions who were transported to the Americas. The ongoing aftermath of the murder of George Floyd bears witness to the ongoing consequences of that terrible evil and in the broader compass the list of consequences is truly endless. In the face of it all, who can blame those who despair and who fear for their children and their grandchildren growing up in such a world as this which human sinfulness has so deeply damaged.

Pause

Return with me to Matthew's narrative and consider – for a moment – this woman who gives the gift of faith to Jesus and receives God's blessing in return. Her daughter – she declares – is tormented by a demon. Such is the woman's concern and her pain that we cannot doubt that she has explored all other possible avenues for relief and healing for her child. It is a desperate woman who turns to Jesus overwhelmed by the apparent hopelessness of the situation. Desperation, her overwhelming desire – her yearning – -- for hope drives this woman to a relentless persistence in her quest.

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‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Earlier, Matthew has told us of Jesus’ call to persistence in prayer. This Canaanite woman epitomises precisely that and it is a persistence rooted in the very depth of her soul for such is her love of her daughter.

“This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”’

The heart of God --- we can be sure ---- is with the suffering of our world. If there is to be any hope for that suffering --- -- then it lies with God. And God has called you and me to be the instruments of his hope. How close are our hearts to God? Truly – how close. Where does our prayer originate? Does it sit lightly on our lips – -- or is it rooted persistently – in the depths of our being?

‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

In the name of the Father -----