

## Reflecting on God's Word

Reading: Matthew 15:21-28 (NT page 982)

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon: <sup>22</sup>**\_A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."**

The author of the Gospel according to Matthew wrote the Gospel in a way that engaged with his readers. His readers were Jews that converted to Christendom. And because they were Jews he knew their sentiments and cultural preconceived ideas pretty well. He knew that they would not misuse the Name of the Lord and that they would keep to the commandments of the Law. But in order for them to understand that Jesus Christ broke and changed the old human made laws he tells the Gospel story in such a way that it must have shocked them to realise the radical changes of the Gospel.

Our reading is no exception. Jesus went to the Gentile territory of the port cities Tyre and Sidon (today would be parts of Lebanon and Syria). The Jews did not respect the Gentiles. In fact they called them dogs and regarded them as not welcome in the kingdom of God.

Now Jesus find himself on "unholy, unclean" soil talking to a Gentile woman. In their eyes it was a shameful thing to do! But Jesus did not care. And to make matters even more complicated, this woman was a Canaanite. The Canaanite's were the most morally despised of

Israel's enemies in the OLD Testament! By now Matthew's Jewish readers would be on edge.

Then Jesus goes one step further. He uses the old Jewish conversion formula to prove a new point. The Jewish conversion formula stated that Gentile woman could convert to Judaism since the time of Ruth. But in order to determine that their intentions were genuine they had to follow a strict procedure whereby they would go to the priest and asked to be included in Judaism. Three times they would be insulted and rejected and if they returned after the third time the priest would say: "Tradition has prevailed you are now allowed into the Jewish ways!"

In this case Jesus follows the formula with only one change. He also treats her quite rude by ignoring her at first, then says He is only sent to the Jews and then refers to the fact that it is nOT right to give the children's bread to the dogs! She and everyone else knew that Jesus was referring to the practise whereby Gentiles were regarded as "dogs".

But she remained faithful and after the third time Jesus DID NOT say tradition has prevailed but faith has! Her faith in Him made her coming back. And because of her faith in Jesus, her daughter was healed.

The message: God is a righteous God full of mercy and love!

I do not think we can look at this text and not be touched by the raw emotions visible between the lines. I mean here is a woman who is desperately seeking help for her daughter who is seriously ill.

It is a well known fact that the people of the first century Mediterranean world thought of illness in terms of demon possession. These are persons, afflicted with especially severe diseases, either bodily or mentally, (such as paralysis, blindness, deafness, loss of speech, epilepsy, melancholy, insanity, whose bodies in the opinion of the Jews demons had entered, and so held possession of them as not only to afflict them with ills, but also to dethrone the reason and take its place themselves.

It really touches the very inside of my own soul. Many of us have experienced the same feeling when our children have been unwell. When your child is dying or ill, you do not care about tradition or silly human rules – all you want is for God to touch your child, or if there is no cure, to take your child into His eternal loving care. And this is exactly what this woman did.

She knew that Jesus could help her. She confessed that He is the savior of Israel. And despite all Jesus' efforts like a typical Jewish rabbi, to put her off, she refused. She kept on coming back. But again this is no surprise to all of us. All of us will do almost everything and anything to just get our loved ones better when they are ill. Yes and we will do almost anything and everything to help us cope when our loved ones die.

Jesus' words must have hurt her but even all the insults of being called names such as a "dog" who steals the bread of the children", did not deter her. She kept on begging for mercy....

And then the miracle happens: Jesus showed her the mercy of God looked at her and said her faith has saved her. And from that moment her daughter was healed.

We all need the mercy of God – no matter who we are, where we are coming from or what we believe. But in order for us to receive mercy, we must have a relationship with God. And we all know what it takes to have a relationship on earth – hard work, trust, commitment, faith in the other party and unconditional love. Relationships do not fall from the air. They happen each and every time we connect in a meaningful way with the other. It happens when you start to know each other a wee bit better by asking, enquiring and exposure to different situations. It is then that you know something of the other party. It is also the same with our relationship with God. In order to "know" God a wee bit better, we need to spend time with Him by reading our Bibles, through prayer, talking to others about Him. I said "know God" in converted commas, because no one on earth will ever know God because He is the Totally OTHER. What we do know is what we read in the Bible and experience on a daily level.

And then when we have a relationship with God and we go through the struggles of life and death, we realize how God pours out His mercy and love – through small and large things, events and people.

I have experienced such mercy this holiday.

As you all know we have been away to the South of France in the region of the river Dordogne. It was an experience of a life time, especially the driving. I had to get used to driving on the other side of the road with a totally different car of which the first and third gears are very close...you can just imagine how many times Nanda and I nearly lost our front tooth on the dashboard!

And because we got totally lost en route to our destination, we were determined not to make the same mistake on the way back. So we decided to take the biggest motorway back to Bordeaux. But we had to pass through a lot of wee villages on the way to the motorway.

In such a wee village all of a sudden police officer appeared and told us to pull over. Even after a week in France our vocabulary consisted of yes, no, hallo, how are you and thank you. So this officer had to call a colleague to come speak to us. We didn't know why he pulled us over, so we were all a little nervous... "This your car?" he asked. No, I said, it's a rental. "You've been drinking?" I replied NO. "You blow in this." The policeman probably couldn't believe his eyes when the breathalyzer indicated that I didn't have anything to drink – we were in the wine country, after all! So I had to blow in it again. He

then said: "Licence." "Oh, you from SA? Yes, I replied, but we live in Scotland now" "Ecosse". We knew that the guy could understand us when he replied: "Nobody's perfect"!

In the end it transpired that we were going to fast. "Perhaps you do not know the rules in my country", the officer said, but in the town you only go 50 km per hour. Today I give you gift, you can go, next time, you pay 90 Euro." And so we set off to the airport again, this time a little slower...

It was a real mercy to me, because I knew that I did not have enough cash on me to pay the fine! I saw pictures of me arrested and missing our flight to Edinburgh.

On the way back to the airport I could not help thinking about God's mercy and love. I could not help thinking how lost we would have been without God's love and mercy, how terrible our lives would have been if God did not save us through Jesus Christ, how terrible sad deaths would have been, how hopeless illness would have made us feel.

But God showed us mercy, love and grace just as He did through Jesus to a vulnerable and despised heathen Gentile woman.

But in order for to receive God's mercy to happen, all we need is faith. Faith that there are no other hope than the hope we have in the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Faith that

we know that we can trust God – no matter what! Faith that can move mountains! Faith - in the One God who can make the impossible possible.

Faith - that God loves us just as we are. And this is the power of God's love. He loves us and will keep pressing through His Holy Spirit to change our lives for the better. All we need is to believe and to hold on to His Hand. And if we believe in Him, believe in His Hope and love, then we will also reach out to the strangers, the sinners, the marginalized, and all those people whom we despise!

May we show mercy to others as God shown it to you and me.

Amen