

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Isaiah 56:1,6-7 / Matthew 15:21-28)  
16.08.2020

How should we approach and welcome today's gospel passage? I think it legitimate to see and present it, first of all, as a word of hope for the desperate.

The Canaanite woman who came to Jesus for help was clearly driven to Him out of desperation.

There is more than just desperation to be evidenced in this woman, however. This Gospel story is also a call to audacious faith and courageous hope.

The Canaanite woman also displayed great audaciousness, strong courage and firm assurance before the Lord at whose feet she fell.

It certainly demanded a lot from the Canaanite woman to even speak to Jesus, let alone expose her problem to Him, given what she knew about how others would have regarded her communicating with a Jew. The Canaanite woman would have known only too well, how, at that time, many people, on both sides of the divide, would have frowned upon her daring to go up to Jesus with her request; these people would have looked at her askance. There was a strong feeling of racial separation between Canaanites and Jews. Even if there was not always open hostility and overt conflict between the two, there was, all the same, a very clear-cut separation which both sides adhered to and observed rather strictly. The barrier between Jews and Samaritans/Samaritans and Jews was one people just didn't cross. And yet this woman did! And she encouraged Jesus's disciples and Jesus Himself to make a crossing in her direction too!

The story shows us how the woman's reaching out to Jesus was met, first of all, by reticence. We are particularly struck that this reticence came from Jesus Himself. The disciples actually pleaded with their Master to heed to woman while He Himself still chose to ignore her plea.

We hear Jesus explain His stance to the woman. He told her that at this stage of His ministry, He was still convinced that He was *sent first of all to the lost sheep of Israel*. Of course, to be sent *first of all* to one group does not necessarily imply that ultimately He wouldn't have a mission to others, but for the moment, when the Canaanite woman comes on the scene, Jesus is still anxious to keep His priorities right.

Without developing this thought to the extent that it could be developed, I think it is important to flag up that the role of the Canaanite woman in Jesus' ministry should not be under-estimated. This woman forced Jesus, as it were, to open up His mission beyond the confines of His own people. For this reason she played a pivotal role in the Christian story.

In passing, let me also say that I am reminded by today's Gospel story of a scene found early on in John's Good News account, the story of the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee. In that scene in John 2 Jesus is still not sure that *His hour* has come; He is hesitant about working the miracle His mother asked Him to accomplish.

In both stories – today's and that of Cana – a woman's intervention led the Master to go further than He Himself anticipated going.

To come back to my initial point that desperation was this woman's driving force...

Despite Jesus' initial ignorance of the Canaanite woman who cried out for His attention, she persisted in calling out to Him. Driven by desperation, this woman relentlessly called out for

Jesus' intervention in her daughter's favour. Indeed, she clamoured so loudly that the disciples suggested to Jesus that He should give in to her, if for no other reason than that we they might get peace!

As we have already seen, as the story progresses, the woman is shown to have been not only desperate, but also very courageous. Her persistence shows that she was woman of character and stamina. She simply would not be deterred. Such stubbornness can be a spiritual quality. It can bring about change people might deem unthinkable and even impossible. At the time of his passing. I was struck to hear the stubbornness of John Hume spoken of so freely – with admiration really. It was seen as not just a display of pigheadedness, but as a determination that became an instrument, which was, we could say, used by the Lord as a catalyst for change.

The example of the Canaanite woman encourages us in the difficult moments and situations of our lives. This woman spurs us on to hold confident hope in our hearts; what we might nearly call stubborn and intransigent hope. Such hope can be required of us during certain hours of trial and desperation we encounter and dark nights we are called to traverse in our lives.

The Canaanite woman shows us that we can hold ourselves before the Lord strong in faith however much people around us may disapprove of or scorn our stance.

In the end, it was especially for her faith that Jesus commended the Canaanite woman. He declared simply: *Woman you have great faith!*

It is important for us to see that no matter how desperate our situation might be, we can dare to be audacious enough to approach the Lord in faith – even when our initial experience with Him might discourage us.

I think it fair to see the call addressed to us this morning as a call to be persistent in faith and strong in hope, while trusting in love!

The last point made there is so important. I want to unpack it just a little.

We must remember that in this whole episode it was love that spurred the Canaanite woman on: love for her suffering daughter. Before such compassionate love Jesus could not remain indifferent. The woman's love for her daughter awakened and moved Jesus' own entrails of mercy. This illustrates for us how our love can have an enormous influence upon the Lord.

Saying that, I think of yet another woman encountered in the Gospel story who is pointed out to those around as a model by Jesus Himself. I think of that woman of whom Jesus said that much was pardoned her because she loved so much.

It was surely love of her daughter that pushed the Canaanite woman to turn to Jesus ... just as it was love that led the Lord to change His heart and open up His mission not only to the people of Israel, but to all who stood in need of God's mercy.

The word of God addressed to us this morning invites us to trust in the Lord's healing power in our lives and in the lives of those dear to us; Christ's loving desire to deliver us and restore our brokenness – and also to deliver those for whom we implore His freeing grace, offering restoration to the broken people we care for.

The Lord delights in exhibiting His love to us and to others. He does this in response to our and to their expressions of faithful trust in Him.

Amen!