

May I speak in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

There are a number of passages and stories in the Bible that I can still not read without a real sense of shock. A major example in the Old Testament is the near sacrifice of Isaac by his father, Abraham. An example from the New Testament is this morning's Gospel.

The story is told both in Matthew's gospel and in Mark's. There are a few differences, but one apparent difference isn't one. Matthew talks about a Canaanite woman and Mark about a Syro-Phoenician. But they are really the same place. The Canaanites occupied the promised land when the Children of Israel arrived, and they needed to be driven out. Indeed, Exodus suggests that God required the Israelites to exterminate them, man, woman and child. Unsurprisingly relations between the two people remained extremely poor. The Phoenicians, as they came to be called, were a powerful people, major traders and seafarers; probably the best sailors in the Mediterranean. Two of their main cities were Tyre and Sidon referred to in the Gospel. But they are the same people.

Another little bit of background to today's story. Jesus has been engaged in a challenging debate with lawyers and pharisees from Jerusalem. The conflict is starting to hot up and, perhaps not wanting to trigger the final confrontation and also seeking some rest, he moves to or just over the border. And then the woman arrives.

She is not a good rôle model! Women at the time were supposed to stay home and stay quiet, well away from strange men. But she is desperate; her daughter is seriously ill, as she says, 'tormented by a demon'. She has clearly heard about Jesus's healing. Hence her arrival. Her words are interesting: 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.' The people from Jerusalem usually addressed him as Rabbi, Teacher. It was his disciples who called him Lord. So does she, and she also refers to him as the Son of David, a Jewish Messianic title, which even his disciples have not yet started using. And she may well know the extent to which mercy is part of Jesus's message: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' he has said, quoting Hosea. She is pushing the right buttons.

But Jesus says nothing. Perhaps there is a large crowd and he hasn't heard. Perhaps he is waiting to see what develops. But his disciples have heard and are fed up with her. 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' But the word translated as 'send away' can equally be translated as 'release', as in release from prison or release from lockdown. A translation that makes sense might be 'Give her the healing she wants and get her off our back!' Now Jesus speaks, but to his disciples not the woman. 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel', just what he said when he sent the disciples out. He has come to proclaim the Kingdom, and everything he does, preaching or healing, is with the intention of furthering that aim. He is not there to heal anyone who asks him, just to be nice. The healing is part of the proclamation of the Gospel, not an end in itself.

But the woman breaks through the cordon sanitaire, throws herself at his feet, and again asks for his help.

This time he addresses her, and the words still have power to shock. 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' Yes, the word for dog is not the usual Greek word, *kuon*, but *kunarion*, a little dog, a puppy. I don't think that makes it any better. The Jews did not like dogs, regarding them as violent, unclean, even if useful. 'Dog' was a regular form of abuse to describe gentiles, those of different faiths. Even if it is metaphorical, the statement is grossly, shockingly offensive.

What is he doing?

Commentators have come up with a variety of suggestions. One is that he was totally exhausted, and caught with his compassion down, though he quickly recovers. Perhaps.

At the other extreme, perhaps he is being ironic, saying it with a twinkle, discerning the kind of person she is, hoping to elicit the response which actually comes.

But a third view, a middle way, one that I find myself coming round to, is that Jesus is testing her. He does this to people to see if they really mean what they are saying: the young man who wants to follow Jesus but first must bury his father, 'Let the dead bury the dead'; the rich young man who wants eternal life and is told to sell all that he has. The man who addresses him as 'Good teacher' and gets the reply 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.'

I think Jesus is testing her.

And of course, she passes with flying colours. It's not merely the humorous quick-wittedness with which she turns Jesus's comment upside down. It is her clear understanding that, yes, the children, the children of Israel, must come first, but that God's generous grace is not in any way limited that earns her Christ's reply: 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Some have suggested that this encounter marks a change in Jesus's understanding of his mission in relation to the gentiles. I don't know, but as this morning's first reading from Isaiah makes clear, it is already Jewish teaching that the Gentiles will also be called. Certainly, though, John reports him as saying, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth'—lifted up, of course in his glory on the cross,—'will draw all people to myself.' And at the end of Matthew's gospel comes the commission: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

Finally, and briefly, what does it say to us, gathered virtually, in our present strange circumstances?

It is a reminder of a number of things: the absolute inclusivity of Jesus's message; the fact that his power and love bring healing to all; but above all the fact that we are called to persevere in prayer. God answers our prayers, but sometimes he waits for his right time; sometimes he answers in a way that we do not expect and we then don't recognise that the prayer has been answered; sometimes he waits until we can understand better what is it that we are asking for. But whichever it may be, he wants us to persevere in asking. Think of his parables of the man needing bread in the middle of the night, of the importunate widow seeking justice, of Christ himself in the Garden of Gethsemane: 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' So, let us persevere in our prayers, even if we don't experience at once what we hope for, but confident that God will answer them in the way that is best. And then we may hear him say 'Women, man, child, great is your faith. Let it be done as you wish.'