**THE SYRO-PHONECIAN WOMAN** Sunday 9th September 2018.

St Michael & All Angels, Barnes Trinity XIV

In today’s Gospel, Jesus appears to ignore a women’s plea to heal her daughter, he seems to do this because of her background, and to insult her directly – only doing what she asks by making him change his mind.

It doesn’t sounds much like the Jesus we think we know.

GENTILE WOMAN

To throw light on this story we should know a number of things:

Here in Mark’s Gospel this person is described as both a ‘Gentile’ (that is, not a Jew), and also as a ‘Syro-Phoenician’ (roughly from the area of Lebanon and Syria today). Matthew’s Gospel calls her a ‘Canaanite’, which is the same thing, but is a much more loaded term, as historically the Canaanites were the great enemies of the people of Israel.

Added to this, is the fact that she is a woman. In our more egalitarian times in the west, it is hard to understand the attitude towards the relations of men and women that existed in biblical times – to approximate it we might look at many middle-eastern cultures today, in which men and women, especially those who are not related, never mix or address each another.

So this encounter is complex, and is transgressive in all sorts of ways.

Jesus is speaking to a non-Jew, an enemy of the state (as it were), and a woman. He is crossing boundaries of race, gender, faith, culture and status.

It Is edgy – quite literally – because Jesus is on the boundary between Jewish and pagan territory. This meeting takes place on a boundary, where both Jesus and the woman are on the edge of their frontiers. And this tells us something about the meaning of this whole passage – it is about a testing and pushing of the boundary of inclusion for salvation and faith.

SPIRITUAL CONFORT ZONES

It also tells us something about ourselves. We use the expression ‘out of our comfort zone’, but it is in this zone that some of our greatest creativity and growth takes place. This is particularly true for the spiritual life. We come to church to be reassured, nurtured and comforted – but not only that. If that was all we got from church we would remain as spiritual infants, untested, untried, and stunted. We also come to church to be challenged, to be taken out of our spiritual comfort zones, in order to be taken to a new place in our relationship with God. That is never easy, it is as uncomfortable as this meeting between Jesus and this woman.

DOG

And yes, Jesus does call her a ‘dog’ – on the surface it’s about insulting as it gets.

In any discourse, the minute you start calling people animals you have descended to a level that strips people of their humanity, dignity and rights - which leads to treating them in unspeakable and aggressive ways. We see this trait In societies everywhere, when groups are labelled as animals, it is an attempt to undermine something essential within them so that we can make invalid the normal rule and rights which apply to human beings.

Undoubtedly, Jesus shared the cultural world view of his own time and his own people – how could he not? Jesus is also tired, he goes into a house and ‘did not want anyone to know he was there’, and this woman comes and disturbs him at the moment all he wants is a bit of peace and quiet! It is somehow reassuring to know that Our Lord’s humanity even extended to a shortness of temper and irritability when he was tired.

But here, all is not quite as it seems. When we know that the Greek for dog is a *diminutive*, we discover that the word is closer to ‘house-dog’ than anything else. What you have to imagine, is what you sometimes see in medieval paintings of tapestries – the beloved pet dogs of the house that sit at the family’s feet and under the master’s table - which are loved and cherished, and have a special position in the household. This is not the feral, scavenging animal you still see in the Middle East today. Jesus meets this foreign enemy woman, and in his language, he brings her into the home as a member of the family. This nuance, invisible to us, would not have been lost on the first readers of this Gospel.

LET THE CHILDREN BE FED FIRST

And what brings all this together, is the wider context of the narrative of Mark’s Gospel.

When it says at the start of this passage, *‘From there he set out and went away’*, we have to ask ourselves, from what, from where and from whom? Well, Jesus has just come from having an argument with the Pharisees, in which Our Lord has roundly criticized them for caring more for outward things than inward things. For elevating ritual purity over moral intentions.

And then, you see, we move immediately to this meeting with this gentile, Canaanite, Syro-Phoenician woman, who exemplifies everything that the Pharisees thought was beyond the pale. And in her, Jesus finds purity of intention and true faith. The healing of her daughter, is almost a secondary matter, in comparison to this much greater fact.

Notice that Jesus says, ‘Let the children be fed first’.

It is not a question of the gentiles being ignored completely, but about the best order of things, and the right time.

At the start of the Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples that they must begin by going to the lost house of Israel. You begin, quite naturally, with those you know best.

But by the end of the Gospel, Jesus is sending the disciples out to baptize and make disciples of ALL nations – and this story is the turning point.

Just a little later, is the story of Jesus healing and feeding large numbers of people. He doesn’t ask them where they’re from or who they are, or if they have fulfilled the rigours of the Law. It’s not about who they are or what they’ve done, but simply that they ARE – because they exist – that they are loved by Jesus. They are loved by God.

HUMBLE ACCESS

The climax of this story, comes, strangely, not in the words of Jesus, but in the words of the woman herself:

*‘Sir, even the dogs, under the table eat the children’s crumbs’*

She has taken Jesus’ word for her, and made it the foundation of a Christian understanding of divine grace.

Our world is in desperate need of this loving grace of God.

Whenever people describe other people as animals.

Wherever the disadvantaged are sidelined and ignored.

Whoever treats people not as individuals but as types.

In Sweden, in Germany, in our country, we are seeing the rise of parties and movements, that want to judge, exclude and remove others in a manner that is both reminiscent of the Pharisees, and also has uncomfortable and more recent historical resonances - we must be alert to this betrayal of our essential humanity, of the Gospel of Christ.

For as soon as we realise that none of us is worthy, then we are all equally worthy of this gratuitous, generous, underserved, unmerited, unbounded, free and full love of God, which sees us as individuals to be loved us just as we are, for who we are, and not who we wish we were, or what we might be.

When we come to receive the Sacrament at the Altar, we come as the Syro-Phoenician women, kneeling before Jesus, asking for his help, receiving his acceptance, and knowing that only he can give us what we need. His love and mercy are so great, that even the tiniest crumb is enough to being about a miracle in our lives.

It is this passage and this idea, which forms the basis of one of my favourite prayers, known as the Prayer of Humble Access. Let me finish with it now:

*We do not presume, to come to this thy table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercy; we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table, but thou art the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son, Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood; that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.* **Amen***.*