

Today's Gospel reading is one of the more perplexing passages of scripture that we have. For if we take the words of the Gospel at face value, Jesus initially appears to be totally dismissive of the Canaanite woman who has come to him for help. We see a Jesus who doesn't want to be bothered, and someone who is quite rude, calling the woman "a dog" – an ancient Jewish insult! We see a Jesus who is acting totally out of character; not someone who is welcoming but someone who is aloof and curt. And if we only had this passage on which to base our opinion of Jesus, I suspect that we all might wish to think again about him.

But then again, this understanding of the passage relies on us only understanding and taking the story at face value. So what happens when we look behind the text? What happens when we read the text in a different way? Perhaps this passage of scripture and Jesus' actions and demeanour might not be as uncharacteristic as first thought!

As we heard at the beginning of the Gospel reading Jesus had taken his disciples into the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is not part of Israel, but a neighbouring region outside the Jewish territories. It was a gentile controlled region, which no self-respecting Jew would ever enter. It is therefore perhaps a little odd that Jesus – a Jewish Rabbi – should willingly and deliberately enter this region. But having said this, Jesus had his reasons.

The district of Tyre and Sidon and its inhabitants were hated by the Jewish people. They were each other's enemies and were often at war. In many ways they were to the Jews, a bit like the people of Samaria, only hated even more. Jesus was well aware of this enmity that existed and it is likely that it is because of his knowledge of this, that he chose to lead his disciples to this region. For where better could he lead his disciples, to a place where he could be guaranteed that he would not be disturbed by the Jewish crowds which always seemed to be following him, or indeed from the religious authorities which constantly sought ways to trap him? The only place was somewhere where they would not go. Tyre and Sidon was the obvious choice, so consequently Jesus leads the disciples to Tyre and Sidon so as to be able to spend time with them alone and to spend time in prayer.

And all seemed to be going well. Jesus' plan seemed to have worked, that is, until a woman of that region recognised him. Somehow news had reached her of this miracle worker and so she came up to him, shouting after him, pleading for him to have mercy on her demon tormented daughter. And as the account shows, Jesus ignored her to begin with, and only responded to her after the disciples had lost their patience. This seems uncharacteristic of Jesus, but there might well be a reason for his actions!

As we have established, Jesus wanted to be left alone. He had come to this region for space and to be able to instruct his disciples away from the crowds. It is highly likely therefore, that he did not want to draw attention to himself by performing a miracle in that region, and thus attracting crowds here too, and so consequently he did not want to engage with this woman. He was not necessarily being rude or aloof but instead trying to preserve the very reason for which he had come to that region – his anonymity. But this woman was persistent. She was not afraid to ask for help. She knew that Jesus was a great man by reputation and was not prepared to give up. Eventually Jesus relented and entered into conversation with her.

Now as we have already seen, this conversation appears to be quite abrupt and possibly even rude, as Jesus implies in his response that the woman is a dog. But this passage depends on how one reads it. And I say this because of the Greek. The word "Dog" has 2 words in Greek unlike the poorer English language with only one: one for domestic family dogs, and the other for the wild and nasty street dogs. The ancient Jewish insult of calling someone a dog uses the term for street dogs, thus making it an insult. But here in this passage, the writer of this Gospel has Jesus call the woman a house dog. It would therefore appear that Jesus did not mean this to be an insult at all, but was in fact using a phrase that could be considered derogatory in a tongue and cheek way, just like when we call someone 'an old rogue' in jest.

Jesus I think was testing the woman. He wanted to see whether the woman truly had faith and whether she could see through his human Jewish façade to his divine nature. And from the woman's response she could. From her conversation with Jesus she had gone from thinking of him as purely a miracle man to the one who was Lord and Son of God. Jesus saw in her her faith and so heals the girl.

Jesus therefore was not acting out of character as was first thought, but instead was true to his ways – of showing love, compassion and mercy; a mercy beyond our human understanding and willingness. But as with all the other healing miracles – and the gospel stories we have heard in recent weeks, he wanted to see evidence of true faith. He wanted to know that the woman believed in him for who he was and not simply because of his reputation. And this is perhaps what he still wishes to see from us, his followers, some 2000 years on. Do we only believe in Jesus because of his reputation or because we truly understand that he is the Son of God, who can give us life in all its fullness due to his saving act of love on the cross and his mighty resurrection?

And the 2nd thing that perhaps Jesus is teaching us in this reading is that occasionally we too need to escape from the clamour of the world and go somewhere where we can be quiet and alone and just be with God in prayer. Lockdown might have made us 'quieter' than usual, but that's quite different from being still and alone with God. This was the reason why Jesus headed for Tyre and Sidon in the first place, so perhaps every so often we too need to follow his example. And who knows what encounters we will have along the way.