

Each time we come to Mass we say or sing, “Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy”. We probably don’t give too much thought to it. It is part of the ritual of Mass; and ritual is something we do almost by habit. That doesn’t mean that it doesn’t have meaning, but rather that it becomes part of who we are. But still, the question is there: what are we doing at Mass when we say “Lord, have mercy”?

I think this question is raised for us by the Canaanite woman in today’s gospel, when she says to Jesus, “Sir, Son of David take pity on me”. Take pity on me – that is have mercy on me. For this woman these words are a desperate plea. She tells Jesus that her daughter is tormented by a devil. She shows all the instincts of a mother, anxious about her daughter. If we think about it, this was an incredibly difficult situation for this woman, but even more troubling for her daughter. This situation would have made life unpredictable. They would have felt powerless. She had probably tried many avenues looking for a cure, but none of them worked. Her cry, “Lord, have pity; Lord, have mercy”, wasn’t just a ritual cry. In fact, it could not have been, because this woman was a foreigner, a stranger. She did not belong to the same religion as Jesus.

This fact helps us understand Jesus’ response to her. It is a response that I expect shocked us. First, he ignores her. Then, he begins to argue with her and push her away. But the woman will not be got rid of so easily. She and Jesus engage in an exchange of words where one tries to outdo the other. Jesus likens her to a dog – which is the way that outsiders like her were considered by the insiders like Jesus. This allows Jesus to say that the dogs are fed outside the house. Here he is probably suggesting that she’ll get nothing from him because she is an outsider. But she sends back a quick response – not so much arguing but jesting with him. She doesn’t take offence at being likened to the house dogs, but notes that the house dogs usually scramble around under the table and take the scraps while the children are eating.

With this she wins. She forces Jesus to listen to her and to recognise that she has faith. In fact, Jesus says that she has great faith – she a stranger, an outsider. I think that there are two consequences of this declaration by Jesus. The first and most obvious consequence is that the woman’s daughter is well again. Her life has been turned around, and so has this woman’s. The second consequence is that this woman has become a model of what it means to have

faith. The gospel invites us to pay close attention to what is going on. There is a message here that faith is closely connected to salvation. When people are healed and when lives are restored – this is salvation. So, faith brings salvation. Faith saves. The woman had trust and confidence in Jesus, and Jesus has shown mercy to the woman and her daughter. Jesus goes on to praise her for her great faith. So, this is also what faith is about – having trust and confidence in God. That trust and confidence is displayed in her plea, “Lord, have pity; Lord, have mercy”.

As we ponder this, it is good to realise that the prayer we speak or sing at Mass – “Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy” – is an expression of our faith. Each time we utter those words, we long for the saving work of God to transform our lives. But more than this, when we utter those words, we also praise God just as the woman did. She fell at the feet of Jesus and addressed him as Lord. In the Mass, the “Lord, have mercy” is a song of praise. So, it is good that we are in the habit of saying those words at Mass, because through using them, we build up the confidence to say them at other times when we need God’s help. Seeking God’s help is an expression our faith. At one level, this is what being a disciple of Jesus is about – having faith.

But there is another lesson about being a disciple of Jesus. This lesson comes from the fact that Jesus was in a foreign territory, so this woman was an outsider to him, someone who did not know the Scriptures. Yet, she still had faith; she still recognised him as one who could heal. What was at stake in this gospel story was whether her faith would be recognised. Jesus eventually declares that she had great faith. By this he was saying that she demonstrated the faith than many of the people who were insiders could not demonstrate. Jesus wanted people to learn from her. We too can learn from her. Faith is not simply about having all the right formulas. Rather it is about recognising and worshipping Jesus. That was what this woman did. She was persistent and her prayer was answered.