

I think most people begin to feel a bit uneasy when they hear this gospel. By the end everything seems fine, but what happens early in the story is troubling. Jesus seems to act in a way that we do not expect. We expect him to be welcoming to everyone and to help those who ask for his help. But in this gospel story, he is making life very difficult for this Canaanite woman. So, what is going on?

We can make some sense of it if we note that the woman was Canaanite. This meant that she did not have the same religion as Jesus. We would say that she was a stranger and a foreigner. She came from a neighbouring land and was not a worshipper of the God of Israel. This is why Jesus seems to rebuff her. We pick this up in his language where he refers to her and her people as dogs. He makes it clear that he was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. When he talks about taking the children's food and giving it to the houndedogs, he makes it very clear that this woman does not even qualify as being one of the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He is basically telling her that God's mercy is not available to her.

But as we heard, the story does not end there. The woman engages Jesus in conversation. Even when he insults her and rebuffs her cries, she responds by pressing him to act to help her. She is desperate because her daughter is tormented by a devil. This is why she keeps pleading with Jesus. But there is more than that. She has heard about Jesus and his power to cure people. Perhaps she had seen his miracles firsthand or maybe she knew someone who was cured. The way she addresses Jesus suggests that she recognises him as someone who is not like other healers. She calls him the Son of David, which is a title that says he is God's chosen one. When he makes the comment about not feeding the houndedogs with the scraps falling from the children's table she comes back at him and says that even houndedogs can eat the scraps that fall from the master's table. She is persistent and she absolutely believes that Jesus can help her. This is what changes Jesus' attitude to her. At the end he praises her for her faith and grants her wish. And we are told that her daughter was well again from that moment.

This is a story about faith and coming to faith. It is important that we know what Jesus means when he declares that she has faith. Her faith is on display in her dialogue with Jesus. There are two aspects to it. The first is that she recognises Jesus as having divine power. She knows that he has the power to cure her daughter. The second is that she has complete trust in him;

she trusts that he will help her in her need. This is the thing about faith: there are always two aspects to it. It is about knowing that God is merciful, and it is about trusting that God's mercy will be shown to us. Of course, we know this, and it is important that the readings remind us of it.

There is another lesson in today's gospel, and it all has to do with the fact that this woman was an outsider. If we were living at the time of Jesus and had seen what had happened, we would have been scandalised that faith could be found in someone who did not belong to the sheep of the house of Israel.

This message has a relevance for us. It tells us that there can be people outside the church, outside the Christian community, who have faith. I wonder if those among us who were baptised as adults might not recognise the truth of this. Even before your baptism, you may have had great faith. Something happened that pushed you to seek out Jesus and to get to know him. At some point you trusted him so much that you were ready to seek friendship with him. Maybe you had heard about him and wanted to know more. Maybe you had seen in others the joy and peace that came from knowing and trusting Jesus. Maybe you had a particular need at that time, and you were ready to ask Jesus for help. Of course, your coming to faith may not have been very spectacular but at some point, something happened that made you want to know more about him.

There are some lessons for us as a community. The first lesson is to recognise that people we regard as outsiders may have faith. Secondly, we should welcome that faith and acknowledge it. This can mean helping such people to take a step to find out more about Jesus and to deepen their trust in him. The community can be a place where their faith can be nurtured, and they can take steps to deepen it and eventually to seek baptism. The third lesson is that our own witness of faith might be the very thing that prompts someone from outside to want to learn about our belief. The witness of a community and its welcoming gestures are always powerful signs of Christian faith.