

Sunday 16th August 2020 – Matthew 15. 21-28

Today's Gospel reading speaks of a Syrian woman, desperate to get help for her child. It's all too familiar, isn't it? Syrian parent, desperate to give their child a reasonable life. Not a life in the town they had fled because it had been reduced almost completely to rubble by civil war. Not a life in a refugee camp with hundreds of thousands of others, dependent on unreliable handouts. They want a life where there is no bombing, where they know where the next meal is coming from. Where they can be useful members of a peaceful society, where their children can receive an education. A life, in other words, which we all have, and usually, if we're honest, take for granted.

In the reading, a Syrian woman, with a sick child, comes to Jesus. In doing this, the woman would have been well aware of how much she was asking. Living so close to Israel, she would have had no illusions about how Jews felt about Gentiles. As a woman she would have been used to being treated as a second class citizen in her own culture. She knew well that the Jews would think she didn't deserve Jesus' help. In fact, in Matthew's account of this meeting in his Gospel, the disciples were trying to have Jesus send the woman away.

Two things were very clear to the woman, though: one was that her little daughter desperately needed help, and the other was that this man, Jesus, was capable of giving her that help. Those two things drive her to persist in the face of opposition.

Today's Syrian refugees in their desperation to escape the horrors behind them, are facing huge hardships and opposition. Almost every step of the way they face danger, suspicion, and the efforts of governments to block them, send them back, or corral them into dreadful refugee camps. We must wonder what life would have to be like to make us behave like this: to leave our homes, our education, our job, our wider family, our school, our friends, our precious possessions; to sell anything and everything we have to scrape the most money we can manage; to give that money to someone we suspect will cheat us; to take nothing more than we can carry; to travel for days, weeks, or months; to face a horror of an open sea in a flimsy boat with not enough (if any) life jackets, no shelter, no guarantees, in the knowledge that so many who have tried it before us have lost their lives.

I personally can't imagine how bad things would have to be to make me do this.

Eventually, Jesus speaks to the Syrian woman. Not that his first reply to her was exactly encouraging: "The children must eat their fill first because it's not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This seems very puzzling to us: Why was Jesus so insulting to the woman? Why does he seem to be discriminating against her on the basis of her race? What has happened to the love for our neighbour which he preaches?

The key is that the word translated "dog" in our reading literally means "little dog", and this is the only place in the Bible where it's used, so it's obviously very deliberate on Jesus' part. "Dog" was a common way in which Jews referred insultingly to Gentiles, but "little dog", which Jesus uses here, would have meant pet dogs, with a place in the household. We know what pet dogs are like, how much they become part of the family, and we can easily imagine them sitting under a table waiting for a child to drop something, whether accidentally or on purpose. So Jesus isn't being insulting, as it might seem, he's giving the woman an opening.

She accepts the place Jesus gives her but she points out that the even family pet can expect kindness and consideration. And Jesus agrees.

Not only that, but in Matthew's account he praises the woman for her faith. He sends her away with the assurance that her daughter is healed. The woman returns home to find her little girl thrown onto her bed by the demon ... but the demon has now gone, just as Jesus said.

And the similarity between her situation and that of today's refugees is striking. They know they will be foreigners in the lands they are aiming for. But do they really want any more than we would want if we were in their place? Do we not want to live productive peaceful lives, to see our children grow up healthy and happy?

Jesus healed the Syrian little girl, accepting and helping the foreigner who came to him in need. As Christians, loving our neighbour is a command from our Lord, and his parable of the Good Samaritan leaves us in no doubt that our neighbour

includes those that our lines drawn on maps now call the foreigner. It begs a question of us. What can and must we do to help those in desperate need today? What can and must we do in our prayers and actions to change the world towards one where nobody is forced to leave their homes by violence or poverty? The dogs may eat the children's scraps, and the Syrian woman was content to be counted as one of them.

There is a prayer we sometimes use before we receive Holy Communion. We say to God "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table". I suppose the question is this, do we just say it or do we believe it? Do we mean it? In saying this we recognise that we have even less right than the little dogs to be at the meal. But Jesus came for everyone, and God does not distinguish by race or nationality.

God, in his love, doesn't want anyone to stay excluded or waiting under the table like pet dogs for those crumbs that others discard. He doesn't just feed us the scraps. He invites us to sit and eat with him, feeding us the most precious food of all: the bread of life and cup of salvation.

So it's up to us as God's redeemed people, to go out into our world to un-draw those lines on the map which separate people from freedom and peace. To break down barriers and to welcome in Christ's name those who come to us for help, just as Christ has welcomed us.