



Christ and the Canaanite Woman by Jean-Francois de Troy 1743, (Chrysler Museum of Art)

SUNDAY GOSPEL

Persistence in Faith

MATTHEW 15:21-28

Jesus left Gennesaret and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Then out came a Canaanite woman from that district and started shouting, 'Sir, Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil.' But he answered her not a word. And his disciples went and pleaded with him. 'Give her what she wants,' they said 'because she is shouting after us.' He said in reply, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.' But the woman had come up and was kneeling at his feet. 'Lord,' she said 'help me.' He replied, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house-dogs.' She retorted, 'Ah yes, sir; but even house-dogs can eat the scraps that fall from their master's table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.' And from that moment her daughter was well again. ■

GOSPEL REFLECTION

Sr Sue Barker SGS



There are several puzzling and almost shocking behaviours in this story. First of all, how could this woman, who was not an Israelite, have any faith in this Jewish itinerant preacher; and furthermore, how could she have the audacity to accost

Jesus, to pester him so aggressively, and then, be quite undeterred by his seeming rejection of her? Perhaps even more shocking is Jesus' seemingly heartless ignoring of her pleas! Even the disciples are uncomfortable at his treatment of her. Was he really not wanting to help her? Did he really believe until now that he was sent only for the Jewish people?

Whatever Jesus' feelings, he seems to be overwhelmed by her persistence. Nothing would deter her in her desperation to find help

for her daughter. This woman would be remembered in the early Church as an exemplar of what radical and unconditional faith in Jesus looked like.

Jesus seems to find in her persuasive request the assurance that he is being invited to cross boundaries, to include anyone who has a heart open to the power of God.

After his resurrection, he will instruct his disciples to go and teach "all nations". His Church is to be inclusive, a place where all are welcomed. ■

A WORD FROM POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI



This Sunday's gospel passage begins by indicating the district to which Jesus was going: Tyre and Sidon, to the north-west of Galilee, a

pagan land. And it was here that he met a Canaanite woman who spoke to him, asking him to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon.

The woman was not afraid to cry to Jesus, "Have mercy on me," an expression that recurs in the Psalms (cf. 50:1), she calls him "Lord" and "Son of David", thus showing a firm hope of being heard. What was the Lord's attitude to this cry of anguish from a pagan woman?

Jesus' silence may seem disconcerting, to the point that it prompted the disciples to intervene, but it was not a question of insensitivity to this woman's sorrow. St Augustine rightly commented, "Christ showed himself indifferent to her, not in order to refuse her his mercy, but rather to inflame her desire for it."

The apparent aloofness of Jesus who said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," did not discourage the Canaanite woman who persisted, "Lord, help me." And she did not even desist when she received an answer that would seem to have extinguished any hope, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She had no wish to take anything from anyone; in her simplicity and humility, a little was enough for her, crumbs sufficed, no more than a look, a kind word from the Son of God. And Jesus was struck with admiration for an answer of such great faith and said to her, "Be it done for you as you desire."

Dear friends, we too are called to grow in faith, to open ourselves in order to welcome God's gift freely, to have trust and also to cry to Jesus, "Give us faith, help us to find the way!" This is the way that Jesus made his disciples take, as well as the Canaanite woman and men and women of every epoch and nation and each one of us.

Faith opens us to knowing and

welcoming the real identity of Jesus, his newness and oneness, his Word, as a source of life, in order to live a personal relationship with him. Knowledge of the faith grows, it grows with the desire to find the way, and in the end it is a gift of God who does not reveal himself to us as an abstract thing without a face or a name, because faith responds to a Person who wants to enter into a relationship of deep love with us and to involve our whole life.

For this reason, our heart must undergo the experience of conversion every day, every day it must see us changing from people withdrawn into themselves to people who are open to God's action, spiritual people, who let themselves be called into question by the Lord's Word and open their life to his Love.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us therefore nourish our faith every day with deep attention to the Word of God, with the celebration of the sacraments, with personal prayer as a "cry" to him, and with charity to our neighbour. ■

TALKING POINTS

1. What do you think of Pope Benedict XVI's explanation of Jesus' seeming insensitivity to this Canaanite woman's sorrow, in his quoting of St Augustine, "Christ showed himself indifferent to her, not in order to refuse her his mercy, but rather to inflame her desire for it" (*Sermo 77, 1: PL 38, 483*)?
2. Sr Sue Barker explains that this woman would be remembered in the early Church as an exemplar of what radical and unconditional faith in Jesus looked like. How has, or might, Jesus be looking to increase my faith and the faith of others through my own unconditional trust in God's love and mercy?

PRAYER POINTS

Pray for Each Other: Ask about and pray for the needs of the group members. Individuals might pray for themselves or ask someone else to pray for them.

Response: *Son of David, take pity on us, pour out the gift of faith on us and hear our prayers.*

Reflect: : Pope Benedict highlights the need for us to be people who undergo conversion every day, changing from people withdrawn into themselves to people who are open to God's action, spiritual people (cf. 1 Cor 2:13-14). How are you being called to change, to trust and to be more open to God's love and mercy.

Closing Prayer: Jesus give us faith like that of the Canaanite woman, with persistence in prayerfulness, confident in your goodness, and eager to find the way, by placing ourselves humbly at your feet. Amen.