



Lent 2 2019 8.30 am

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How do we make sense of this morning's rather difficult Gospel reading?

The reading is difficult because it paints Jesus in rather a bad light, indeed, a terrible light!

Jesus has travelled to the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, gentile Phoenecia, and he is approached not only by a non-Jew, but by a woman!

The opening conversation appears to bring to a boil the long-simmering prejudice which had existed between the Jews and their nearest neighbours.

At first Jesus, it appears, seems simply to ignore her, not even give her the time of day, a second thought, and then his indignant disciples ask him if they can shoo her away!

At this, Jesus does, at least seem to speak to her, but only to remind her that he has not come for the likes of her and her 'kind', but to seek and to rescue the lost sheep of Israel.

For most people that would have been enough, and walking away from a hopeless situation would have been the logical and safe next step for the woman, but she does not take 'no' for an answer! She keeps

going and she reminds Jesus that 'even worthless unclean dogs can eat the scraps which fall from their masters' tables'.

Not only does Jesus now stop and take some notice of her, he praises her for her great faith, grants her request and answers her deep, heartfelt pain by restoring her daughter to health.

The woman's audacity is evidently borne not only out of desperation but a certainty that Jesus can meet her need.

Her directness is not just bloody-minded belligerence but stems from a firm belief in Jesus' unique power as God's chosen one.

Throughout his ministry Jesus faces scepticism and lack of trust. Some of his hearers feel he is no more than an upstart and a nuisance; a religious irritant at best - a dangerous rabble rouser at worst.

His disciples believe – but only hesitatingly and intermittently, but this gentile woman, this Canaanite woman (whose ancestry may have traced back to the people of Canaan, sworn enemies of God's people who were ousted from the Promised Land by them believes in Jesus implicitly, unreservedly, confidently.

How Jesus deals with her is somewhat enigmatic.

Jesus response, at least at first is downright enigmatic, if not rude.

But Jesus, reflecting on his mission changes his mind.

Jesus has shaped his whole ministry after all on the basis of Israel first and then the Gentiles.

But the woman's deep faith and trust in him suggests that his strategy, the strategy of all the prophets who have gone before him is not fit for purpose.

After all, here is the One who is to be not only the Glory of Israel but the Light to enlighten the Gentiles.

Sometimes strategies don't follow a neat pattern. Things don't follow a linear pattern no matter who you are!

Depp and abiding faith seems to trump everything, puts everything else in perspective: faith trumps everything.

Jesus will be distracted from his set purpose, but he quickly comes to see that there is sufficient food even for the most unlikely people to be fed.

The healing of her daughter must have seemed way out of reach for the Canaanite woman, but she found that her faith unlocked the door which protected the heavenly banquet from being shared with the gentiles.

R S Thomas, in his poem, *The Kingdom*, reminds us that in God's Kingdom there are quite different things going on: things which upset the norms, even what people might deem to be the norms of God's eternal plan of salvation.

In God's Kingdom, all it takes is the simple offering of faith, as green as a leaf; to present oneself with nothing more than one's need, a simple offering of pure faith.

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is Healed;
mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back;
and industry is for mending

The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life.
It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire,
and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Amen.