

Readings: Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15: 21-28

Text: Matthew 15:28 – Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Theme: *Compassion – Love of a mother, love of a brother and love of God*

Mathew has taken us for a tour of Galilee as Jesus and his disciples embark on their public ministry as they learn about God and the Kingdom of God and, for Jesus, what his calling to be the Christ or Son of God might entail. We began this tour with a visit to the market place on the 5th of July, then a visit to the farm in the next two Sundays, a day in a deserted place on the 26th of July and last week it was on the stormy waters of the Galilean lake.

In today's reading, Jesus and his disciples have gone up north, near the Mediterranean coast around the old Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus had just had a spat with the Pharisees who have come from Jerusalem, perhaps alarmed by what they have heard about Jesus' teaching. It seems like Jesus and his disciples have gone up, away from where people know them, for a little rest. But they are met by an interesting surprise as a desperate Canaanite mother comes screaming at them.

"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly," she shouts at Jesus; quite rude, really.

Jesus turns his head but says nothing. The disciples on the other hand tell him to, "Send her away; she keeps shouting after us."

Finally, Jesus says something. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says calmly.

But the woman comes and kneels before him. "Lord, please help me," she begs.

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," Jesus replies.

And she says, "Yes, Lord, I know that. But you and I know that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus says to her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter is healed instantly.

Let us have look at some specific parts of this story. Tyre and Sidon are on the Mediterranean coast, north west of the Galilean region. They are considered gentile and Greek speaking areas. The fact that Matthew refers to the woman as a Canaanite and that she is moving towards Jesus suggests that, Matthew wants us to know that the encounter takes place in Jewish territory. Mark tells the same story, in chapter 7 of his gospel, and he refers to the woman as of Syrian and Phoenician descent.

By referring to the woman as a Canaanite, Matthew wants us to know that she is the lowest of the low with in Jewish society. You would recall that Israel defeated Canaan and occupied it about a thousand years before Jesus was born. So it was like the European settlers occupying Australia on the pretext that the Aborigines were mere animals. The attitude of Israelites towards Canaanites was the same; the Canaanites were dogs!

Now, think about the poorest Aboriginal woman you could meet; that would be the equivalent of the woman in today's story. But she may be the lowest of the low, but she is quite some woman, as Jesus soon finds out.

Most commentators are shocked by Jesus' responses to the woman. They say this is not Jesus, and then try to rationalise Jesus' behaviour. But Matthew is reminding us that Jesus is human like all of us and he is responding as expected. Matthew also wants to remind us that Jesus is a quick learner.

The woman refers to Jesus as Lord, Son of David. By calling Jesus Lord, she acknowledges Jesus as the Lord of all nations. By calling Jesus, Son of David, she acknowledges Jesus at the Messiah that Israel has been waiting for. In short, the woman knows her Bible and her theology.

The Canaanites, though despised and living like the Aborigines of Australia, had been learning from the Jews about God's salvation plan. This is what she is referring to when she tells Jesus that, 'even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table'. This woman, lowly as she may be, has just taught Jesus a lesson about his mission; that it is for all nations and not just the Jews; he is Israel's Messiah, but he is Lord of all.

To his credit, Jesus agrees with the woman and he changes his mind, unlike his disciples who still have not learnt. Their response to this desperate mother is to send her away, just as they did for the people when they were in a deserted place two Sundays ago.

Jesus is clearly impressed that he applauds the woman's 'great faith' in contrast to Peter's 'little faith' from last Sunday's reading, which he derided. But is it really the woman's faith that Jesus is praising?

Think about it. You are a mother, or perhaps a father. Your daughter is dying. The hospital tells you there is nothing they can do. You are told to take your daughter home so you can have some time with her while awaiting the inevitable. And then you hear about this amazing healer in Samoa. What would you do? That is right. You would go to Samoa, even if they tell you that you cannot come because of the outbreak of covid-19 in Australia. What is the thing that makes you go to Samoa, despite the 'don't come' instructions from Samoa? Your faith, or something else?

That is right. It is your love for your child. The Canaanite woman is doing exactly what any mother would do for her child. She would not take no for an answer. She is a woman and a non-Jew, two cultural boundaries that she has to cross; and she is out there by herself, which is another no, no in such societies. But she does not care; even if it costs her, her life, she does not care, so long as her daughter is saved.

Friends, a mother's love is the most powerful force on earth, and we are seeing that among the leaders of the world in the current pandemic. From Jesus' experience, a mother's love is second only to God's love. I am sure all the mothers who are here and are listening on ZOOM, and fathers as well, can relate to the woman's situation.

Paul's famous exposition on love, in 1 Corinthians 13, ends with these words: 'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13:13). Yes, it is the woman's love for her daughter that gave her the courage to risk all to get Jesus' help. Sure she has faith in Jesus, but there is no guarantee that Jesus would help her. So she comes with hope, as well, and her determination is rewarded – her daughter is healed instantly.

Now it is unfortunate that in the English language, we only have one word, love, to express all kinds of love. The love that the woman had for her daughter might be called, motherly love. But Jesus spoke Aramaic and Hebrew and the word that he would have used would be COMPASSION.

According to America Old Testament scholar, Phyllis Trible, the Hebrew word *riham* that is translated compassion in English comes from the word *rehem*, which is the mother's womb. So compassion means, 'a mother's love for the child born of her own womb'.

That is the love that the Canaanite woman had, and I am sure all mothers that are here and are listening know this love. We refer to it as unconditional love, but mothers/women know exactly how it looks like. I was saturated with it from my mother and I am sure so did, or do, all of you. Grace and I have it for our daughters, and I have no doubt that all you parents have it for your children.

Compassion also means, 'the love of people that were born of the same womb for each other'. In simple terms, love of kin. This is the love that enabled Joseph to forgive his brothers, in the reading from Genesis. What his brothers did to him was unforgivable, but Joseph had so much compassion for his family that he saw what his brothers did to him as God's way of saving his family from the famine.

It is normal for families to have strife and friction, but if they can tap into their compassion, fractured relationships can be healed and sustained.

Compassion is so powerful, because, according to Jesus, that is also how God feels for us. In that sense then, God is like a mother to all of us. That is the God that Jesus is experiencing, why he refers to God as his Abba (parent).

In the sermon on the mount, he admonishes his listeners, 'to be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate' (Matt. 5:48). That is the message that we need to hear often. It is a message that communities like our church need to hear every Sunday. The love that you have for your child or your siblings has to be extended to all people in our church family. In other words, try and see others as if they are your sisters, your brothers, your mother or your father.

We may disagree from time to time and, perhaps, get irate at times, but don't forget you are like Jesus, both human and divine; and you have compassion.

People of God, Jesus asks us to be compassionate because, though, we are from different human families, we were all born of the same womb of God our mother, and we all share the same blood of God our Father, poured out through the wounds of Christ our brother – that is COMPASSION and we are God's children; be compassionate of each other.

For the glory of God.

Amen.