

SERMON FOR THE 18TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 4 October 2009)

Text: ²¹ Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. "Son of David!" she cried out. "Have mercy on me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition." ²³ But Jesus did not say a word to her. His disciples came to him and begged him, "Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!" ²⁴ Then Jesus replied, "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel." ²⁵ At this the woman came and fell at his feet. "Help me, sir!" she said. ²⁶ Jesus answered, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ "That's true, sir," she answered, "but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ So Jesus answered her, "You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you." And at that very moment her daughter was healed. (Matthew 15:21-28)

Every now and again you get a passage in the Bible that is difficult to understand or even disturbing. This sermon text is no exemption. As you grapple with it, it tends to hurt you like the sharp thorns on the stem of the thorn bush. But as you move along the stem, your finger tips bleeding and hurting, it suddenly softens into the bud of a rose, which begins to blossom in all its beauty and gives you inexpressible joy.

That was my experience as I reflected on this passage. And I am going to try to take you with me on the journey I had as I studied this passage in the hope that you won't jump off before we reach the end of the journey.

The entry of Jesus in this world is depicted in grand style not least of all in the Gospels of Luke and John. In the Gospel of John we read: ***"Through him all things were made... In him was life... and he made his dwelling amongst us"*** (1:3-4,14). And John says: ***"We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of a grace and truth"*** (1:14). This praise is echoed in Luke's Gospel, not least of all in a song spoken by an old man called Simeon. Holding the baby Jesus in his arms, he sings: ***"Sovereign Lord... my eyes have seen you salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel"*** (2:29-32).

As Jesus started his ministry a few years later, his focus was initially confined to the *people of Israel*. But the warning bells already rang early, also depicted in the prologue of John's Gospel. We read: ***"In him was life and the light shines in darkness, but the darkness did not understand it"*** (1:4-5). A few verses later we read: ***"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him"*** (1:10-11). It is the picture of a father who leaves his

house in search of his lost son. And when he finds him and knocks on his door, the son says to him: "Who are you? I have never seen you before!"

That is exactly what Jesus experienced in Israel. In his home town Nazareth, where he started his ministry, he proclaimed the grace of God to his people. And do you know what they did? They said: "Who do you think you are? Aren't you the son of Joseph, the carpenter whom we all know". And although Jesus wanted to bring healing and show grace to his people, he could not. Instead they dragged him out of the synagogue and literally drove him out of town.

This is approximately where our sermon text starts. We read that Jesus left Galilee and he went off to the territory of Tyre and Sidon. He didn't run away. But it was customary for him every now and again just to withdraw for a while to re-gather his strength. But before he could find rest, this is what happened: A Canaanite woman recognised him. She wasn't from Jesus' home town. In fact, she wasn't even an Israelite. Being a Canaanite she belonged to the indigenous inhabitants of Israel, driven out when the Israelites settled in what was their promised land.

But when this Canaanite woman saw Jesus, something happened that he never experienced in his home town. She cried out to him for help and said: **"Son of David! Have mercy on me! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition."** Jesus didn't expect that. Here was a foreigner crying out for his help.

But this is where the puzzling and disturbing part of our sermon text begins. Jesus rebuffs her. She cries out for help and he ignores her. Maybe it is feeling that you know. You are in a desperate state. You need help. And you cry out to God and say: "God, will you please help me". And it is just quiet. Dead quiet.

That is what happens here. Jesus is quiet. She cries and cries and cries ... and Jesus is quiet. Jesus' quietness is bad enough. But soon the disciples have a go as well. Irritated by her continuous nagging, they beg Jesus: "Sent her away! Sent her away! She is just making too much noise".

Maybe that is something you have experienced as well. The silence of God is broken only by the mockery of others: "Why do you still believe in Him? Where is your God? Show me what he has done for you?"

Fact is, this woman is experiencing opposition from Jesus' disciples and worst of all, as it seems, from Jesus himself. He says to her, and his rebuff is stronger than before: **"I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel."** In my

own words: "You are not part of those in whom God is interested".

Maybe that is also an experience you have had. The experience of self-doubt. God helps here and there. He shows his power to others, but he is *not* interested in me.

It is difficult to discern, why Jesus said that. Earlier we heard the song of Simeon in the temple of Jerusalem: **"Sovereign Lord... my eyes have seen you salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles"** This song echoes what we read all over the Old Testament. In Abram **"all peoples on earth"** were to be blessed (Gen.12:3). And in the book of the prophet Isaiah we read: **"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant ... to bring back those of Israel... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles"** (49:6). But it seems as if Jesus, being not only God, but also totally human, did not yet grasp the magnitude of his mission. Here was a Gentile woman crying out for his help, and he ignores her.

The Canaanite woman believes in Jesus not only *against others*, but even in opposition to *Jesus himself*. And the situation gets worse. The rebuff of Jesus intensifies: When the Canaanite woman, desperate for help, falls down at his feet and begs, **"Help me, sir! Help me, sir!"**, Jesus says, **"It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."**

I imagine that ninety-nine percent of us would have walked away at that point with our tail between our legs. But not this woman. She accepts Jesus' words. She accepts that she does not deserve anything. She knows, she has no right to sit at the table with God. She realises, she has no right on God's mercy.

This is where we sometimes differ. Sometimes we feel: We have a *right* that God helps us. We have *right* that he shows us mercy. If we pray for forgiveness, we have a *right* that he forgives us. If we die, we have *right* to go to heaven.

This woman in her relationship to God does not think in terms of "rights". Neither does she want to take the bread away from God's children. When Jesus says to her: **"[I cannot] take the children's food and through it to the dogs"**, she says: **"That's true, sir"**. But then she adds: That is not what I expect, I just want some of the crumbs that fall from the table."

And do you know what happens: JESUS IS CONVERTED. Maybe being confined to the human body, he did not understand the magnitude of his mission. But he is converted by the faith of a Canaanite woman. When Jesus sees this faith, he

realises: In the life of this foreign woman the kingdom of God has dawned. It is reaching out to the world. And Jesus says to her: **"You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you."** And at that very moment her daughter was healed.

This is a story about faith - taught to us by a foreign woman. We begin to realise, faith is something that transpires between "two" people, God and us. It is not only a matter of God setting the bar, and we trying to reach it. Here is a story of two people being drawn together, "both" being touched.

Furthermore we learn, true faith evolves out of struggle. So often when we encounter lengthy struggles or drawn-out hardships in life, we just give up. When doubt creeps in: Can Jesus help? Does Jesus want to help me? We just give up. There is no endurance. But that is how God molds and refines our faith. Even Jesus experienced it. The story of the Canaanite woman is mirrored in the Passion narrative. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus was crying out to God in agony: **"God, please take this cup from me"**. But he did not. And on the cross, the deafening silence was broken only by the desperate cry: **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"**

Faith, we need to realise, is not a "yes to God" when everything goes well. Faith is trusting God against all odds. Do you want faith? Then accept the challenges of struggle. That is where God refines your faith. It is easy to believe in God when things go well. But that faith is invariably challenged - as it was the case with Job. When God boasted about Job's faith, the devil said: "Let's see whether he will still believes in you when he struggles". And as you know, Job lost everything. But when he *continued* to believe, and refused to reject God, even the devil began to sit up. There is no testimony in your life, when you believe in God in good times. Everybody can do that. But what makes the world sit up and listen is: When your faith is unwavering in difficult times.

Jesus was touched by the faith of the Canaanite woman. It does not matter who you are, where there is faith there is help. Jesus was resurrected. The Canaanite woman experienced the healing of her daughter. Faith is not disappointed. It grows out of our relationship with God, and journey we do together as it touches and even changes "both". Amen.