

Homily (notes) from Canon Philip Dyson
20th August 2023 - 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings (Year A): 1st: Isaiah 56:1,6-7. 2nd: Romans 11:13-15,29-32. **Gospel:** Matthew 15:21-28.

It is an anxious Gentile mother, concerned for her tormented daughter, who beseeches Jesus for help and healing. The conversation that follows is a verbal jousting match, a battle of wits between the tormented mother and a tired Jesus.

Jesus tries silence, then defence, then a put-down to try to shake off the attention. But this is one determined woman, and she will not be put down or put off, and no doubt Jesus delighted in her chirpy response. Help is given in the end, after certain things have been clearly understood.

The healing comes about through the mother's faithful persistence. Jesus is impressed with her unrelenting prayer and faith. We may ask why Jesus responded to the woman in the way he did. After all it does seem brusque even a tad rude.

Jesus was very conscious that the mission initially was to his own people but is he here making a powerful point for his disciples? He pushes the woman to the limit and in doing so reminds them how easy it is to reject and dismiss others out of sheer prejudice.

She displays extraordinary courage and dignity and as Jesus cures her daughter, he draws attention to her great faith. He hereby demonstrates that he had come for men and women of every race and colour in every time and every place.

Jesus is saying God's mercy does not recognise boundaries. It has no limits. God's loving kindness is for everyone. God doesn't have favourites, but every person can have a place in God's heart.

So our 1st reading from Isaiah was written when God's Chosen People had returned from Exile. The foreigners who had attached themselves to the community were to be treated as equals and that God's house was to be a house of prayer for all the peoples, which verse is quoted by Jesus when he cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Psalmist looks beyond his own people to the Gentiles, who he hopes, will come to recognise God's goodness and power and blessing.

St Paul in the 2nd reading is writing to the Christian converts from paganism in Rome. He is explaining to them that they have become the new Chosen people, and he seeks to encourage his fellow Jews to accept what God has done in Christ Jesus.

What Jesus does say is "Woman, you have great faith."
Remember last week, to Peter, "man of little faith, why did you doubt."
Peter in his little faith, began to sink: the woman was unsinkable.

Three qualities shine forth in the greatness of her faith: **Persistence, humility, and humour.**
Her **persistence** is remarkable. With it she breaks through barriers of racial prejudice.

In **humility** she kneels before Jesus, and her prayer is simplicity itself for her hope does not reside in fine words or in her own merits: "Lord, help me."

Jesus initially didn't answer her a word. We have all experienced that feeling in prayer....God hasn't heard us. But delay seems to be a tactic God uses to deepen our sense of dependence.

If we got our answers too readily, we might imagine they are due to our own merits or because our prayer is so good. God puts us to the test. Was Jesus testing this woman by throwing a possible insult at her?

But her other great quality is her **humour**. She can turn a potentially insulting situation into an occasion for quick witted repartee.

I did read that ‘if you meet somebody with a great reputation for sanctity but who has no sense of humour, then you know you are not dealing with genuine holiness. Wait around awhile and you will surely see some ungodly anger or prejudice, or inhibition of love appear.’

We need a holy humour, especially when we are dealing with God about our faults.

May we hear “you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.”

A model for all disciples: **persistent; humble, humorous and unsinkable.**

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