

Today's gospel is one that many priests would find awkward to preach on, I think, because Jesus seems to adopt a very hostile attitude towards the Canaanite woman, even referring to her as a "housedog". Personally, though, I am always glad of "difficult" passages, because they really challenge us to *think*.

In this case, we should first mention two things which soften Jesus' language towards the Canaanite woman. First, we should notice that this happens as Jesus is walking towards Canaanite territory: that is, it was his initiative to go to the pagan territories. And then she comes out to meet him, so they meet in a kind of no-man's land between Israel and Sidon. So when Jesus says to the disciples that he is sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, his actions seem to be saying otherwise. His reluctance to engage with the woman is thus to some degree a ploy to get the apostles to pay attention. Generally they too would have nothing to do with foreigners: Jesus' attitude forces them to ask him to deal with the woman.

The second thing to notice is that the word translated "dogs" is not so offensive in Greek. The Jews in fact used the word "kuon" – dog – for foreigners. "Kuon" was very insulting. It referred to the dogs in the street, who belonged to no-one. Its force might be compared with "cur" or "mongrel" in English. But Jesus uses instead "kunarion" – which refers rather to the family pets. So it is an affectionate variant of the usual word that Jesus uses. In other words, he is rather teasing the woman a little, engaging in an affectionate if somewhat challenging game of words ... and the woman shows that she is every bit up to the challenge. Her riposte to Jesus – "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" – elicits that extraordinary reply: "Woman, you have great faith."

It is interesting that Jesus often berates the disciples, and the Jews in general, for their lack of faith. In Matthew's Gospel, only twice does he *praise* someone's faith: this woman's, and the faith of the Centurion, another pagan, who asked Jesus to cure his servant. (Mt 8)

The woman, by her reply, wins the word game with Jesus. The encounter reminds me a little of that passage in Genesis, when Jacob struggles with the angel (who is really God himself.) They wrestle all night, and the angel – God – is unable to free himself from Jacob's grasp. How can this be? How can a Canaanite woman outsmart Jesus and trap him in a game of words? How can Jacob hold God in a grasp from which he cannot escape? It is only possible because God has allowed himself to fall in love with the human race. This is one interpretation of this passage: it is about our encounter with "the other", and in this sense, "the other" is God. The woman encounters God and his healing power in Jesus, and yes, Jesus encounters his Father in the woman, who, no less than any other son or daughter of Adam, is made in the image and likeness of God, our common Father.

So, we may even say, that there is a conversion, a change of heart, a learning on the part of Jesus' sacred humanity. Scripture tells us that the Lord was entirely without sin, but it also tells us that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man." (Lk 2: 52) It is not unreasonable to see that even Jesus in his sacred humanity learned something here in the encounter with the Canaanite woman.

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What may we learn from this encounter? We live in a time when Western countries – including, in a small way our own – are challenged by the influx of a great number of refugees. The majority of them do not share our Christian faith, do not share our experience of living in democracy, and may not share many of our cultural attitudes. Yet they do share a common humanity... and are often fleeing the terrible violence of war, and have been affected by the destruction of their homes and the death of loved ones.

The truth is, we are not well prepared for this encounter. If our society were stronger, if our Church and our Faith were stronger, we would be better prepared for this encounter. But in fact our society is showing many signs of disintegration. We no longer trust our leaders, neither in politics nor, in many cases, in the Church; most Christians are weak in the practice and knowledge of their faith, and there is a moral degradation that is obvious in our culture. Yet we cannot, as Christians, turn our backs on those in need.

It is worth recalling history, because Europe has experienced something similar before. In the fifth century, the Roman Empire – the by-then *Christian* Roman Empire – was weak and divided. In the East, the defeat of the Huns led to a very new political reality: on the one hand, tribes like the Goths and the Franks had proved their strength by defeating the Huns. On the other, the defeat of the Huns removed a bulwark between Europe and the Mongols. As the Mongols then pressed Westwards, the Franks and Goths and Vandals were themselves pushed Southwards and Westwards, and invaded the weak Roman Empire.

In some places, they arrived as refugees. The Ostrogoths, for example, the eastern Goths, begged to be allowed to enter the Roman Empire for their own safety. They were allowed in. It wasn't long before they took over, setting up their own kingdoms in Italy and Pannonia. They were Christians of a sort, by the way, as were the Vandals who ravaged northern Africa. They were Arians, though, denying that Jesus was the eternal Son of the Father, insisting that he was not consubstantial with the Father but a separate, subordinate Being to Him. Other tribes like the pagan Franks pushed their way West, eventually establishing a Kingdom in the region which today bears their name: France. It seemed like the death knell for European culture and Catholic Christianity in particular.

Certainly there was much violence and much suffering. And yet, out of it all came a new civilisation. Theodoric, the great leader of the Goths, formed an alliance with the Pope; eventually, the Goths would become Catholic. Clovis, King of the Franks, married a Catholic wife who converted him to Catholicism.

(It's worth recalling her story for a moment: she was a Burgundian. The Royal court was mostly Arian, but she had been baptised a Catholic and she clung to her Faith. She worked hard to persuade her pagan husband Clovis to be baptised a Catholic: he was leaning towards the Arians. In secret, she had their first son baptised a Catholic. A few weeks later, he fell ill and died. Of course, someone told Clovis of the secret Baptism and he was furious. He blamed the baby's death on the God of the Christians. Clothilde told him he was being ridiculous: how many of his own pagan siblings and cousins had died unbaptised in infancy? His baptism had nothing to do with his death, but she was happy, she said, since their baby would be there to welcome them to heaven. He couldn't

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say the same for his siblings. Clovis and Clothilde had a second child. Again, Clothilde had him baptised in secret, and again Clovis found out about it. The child fell ill, and Clovis was beside himself with rage – but Clothilde remained defiant. In time, the child recovered, and in the end Clovis decided to accept his wife’s advice: he was baptised a Catholic Christian, and the history of Europe was changed forever.

Under his successors, Pepin and Charlemagne, the Franks would become the great allies of the Pope in Europe. The Vandals, too, became Christian; the Ostrogoths settled in northern Italy, Hungary and down into Croatia, and were converted to Catholicism.

My point is this: none of us knows how history will turn out. We may indeed be facing yet another century of turmoil, not only in Europe but throughout the world. Terrorism, the nuclear threat, these vast movements of people, and environmental degradation and climate change, and now a biological threat are all reasons for concern. We cannot react by treating other people as non-humans, however. Jesus’ teaching is absolutely clear on that. But we will only be well prepared for the challenges ahead if we remain strong in our Faith, in our prayer, in our trust in God and in our practice of the Christian virtues: Faith, Hope, Charity, Fortitude, Justice, Temperance, Prudence.

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