

Surely today's Gospel is one of the most dramatic stories in all the New Testament? I will come to the drama in a minute, but first we should try to fix in our minds just what sorts of accounts the Gospel stories about Jesus really are. Jesus began his ministry when he was about thirty years old; and three years later he was dead. The events of this ministry as described in the Gospels could all have been accomplished inside a fortnight. I mean to say, the stories we have about Jesus were only a fraction of all the things he did. The Gospel writers were not like James Boswell, following Dr Johnson around and taking down every word. The Gospel writers wrote down only a small part of what Jesus did. How tantalising for us to conjecture what they left out. Those writers were selective. That is, they wrote down what they thought were the most important events. So the big question is: Why did they make the particular selections they did from the whole ministry of Jesus?

It comes as a shock to realise that many of the Gospel stories told by the disciples were stories against themselves. With an alarming candour, those who were closest to Jesus – who lived, slept and ate with him – admit that they didn't understand him as well as mere strangers and foreigners. Remember the Gospel a few weeks ago about the healing of the centurion's servant. The centurion was a foreigner, a Roman, an enemy. And yet look how the story ends with Jesus saying, *Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel*. Or that other story in which the only leper to give thanks for his cleansing was a Samaritan, another foreigner, an enemy in fact. Or the Good Samaritan himself who showed up the Jewish priest and the Levite for their callous indifference towards the man fallen among thieves.

How the Gospel writers knock themselves! Let us take a closer look at today's story then and try to discover what it's about. Jesus went from Judea to Tyre and Sidon on the coast of Lebanon. That is some stretch, and you wonder why he bothered. The Gospel writers say it was to get away from the crush of people who wanted him to heal their infirmities. One commentary I read – from the *Intervarsity Press* – said that Jesus wanted to have *some vacation* with his disciples. Some of these biblical commentaries are very wacky, and one imagines Jesus and the disciples trolling off to the seaside with their buckets and spades.

Tyre and Sidon were heathen places so you might imagine that Jesus would get some respite there – because the heathen would not be interested in him, a Jew. Instead, what does he find? *A woman of Caanan* – a despised heathen – recognises him straight away, not just as the wandering Rabbi, Jesus of the Nazareth synagogue, but as *Thou Son of David*. This is an echo of the Gospel in which the blind man sees Jesus as the Son of David while his disciples do not. It's all very puzzling. The Son of David is the Messiah, the Redeemer of Israel. Why should blind foreigners and heathen women be interested in the Jewish Redeemer? I don't know any answer to this question – except it be that God revealed it directly to these strangers.

Anyhow this heathen woman wants something. She wants an exorcism: *My daughter is grievously vexed with a devil*. Why ask Jesus? Why trouble him? Exorcists were ten a penny in those days. And in the early days of the Christian Church the theologian Tertullian said that any Christian – any Christian, mind, not just priests – who can't perform an exorcism should be put to death. Nowadays we sensationalise and glamorise evil, making lurid movies about demonic

possession. In the saner, early Christian days, they knew that evil is banal. They knew that evil is not glamorous but just a bit of dirt – the sort of stuff a competent housekeeper would soon be rid of. We ought not to be in thrall to evil but to see through its shabby, phoney pretensions and cast it out.

Now here's a strange thing: this woman comes distraught, pleading with Jesus, and he ignores her. *He answered her not a word.* Isn't that rather rude and merciless? Whatever happened to Jesus the nice guy, Jesus meek and mild, Jesus in whose mouth butter would not melt; Jesus the do-gooder who has ever since provided opportunities for the sentimental social-gospelling preachers? How rude of Jesus to ignore this woman. Didn't he know his manners? The woman was a foreigner. My word, Jesus had certainly not taken in his *diversity training*.

The disciples, you think, might be shocked by his behaviour. But they aren't. They are Jewish disciples, remember; and the Jews of that time hated the heathen. And they didn't half hate them! The Rabbinic tradition, derived from the Talmud says, *Kill even the best Gentile! Crush the head of even the most beautiful serpent!*

At last Jesus turns to the woman and promptly gives her the brush off: *I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the House of Israel.* So at first he ignored her cry for help. Then she endured the shouts of the disciples for him to chuck her out. Then comes this emphatic put-down in which Jesus says that he has nothing to offer her.

You would think she'd take the hint. But no – instead in this most heartrending moment she comes back to Jesus a third time and says just *Lord help me!*

So is gentle Jesus' heart melted by this desperate appeal? Not at all. He starts to insult her and tells her she's less than human: *It is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs.* Let's get this straight. The bread he is talking about are the rough end bits of the loaf the *απομαγαλιαι* on which diners wipe their hands and then throw to the household pets. This *απομαγαλιαι* is the same linguistic root as Magdala. Good heavens – the woman was a dog no better than Mary Magdalene!

Now to call a Middle Eastern person in any era a dog is the final insult. It doesn't get any worse. But there goes our gentle Jesus again, laying on the scorn thick as a cloud of locusts. There she is standing in front of this man whose true identity she alone knows. His ignorant disciples tell her to shove off. Whereas she who knows him to be the Son of David is rewarded for her faith by being insulted, a dog – by the same Son of David. Surely now she will slink away home to where she might find her little girl dead as a result of demonic seizures?

But no. Perhaps she has learnt her bad manners from Jesus? She is what our slutty mass media calls *feisty*. She comes back at him vehemently, outraged by his apparent callousness. Whatever happens, she is going to give him a piece of her mind – whether he's the Messiah or not: *Truth Lord; yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table!* This visionary woman, who recognises the Messiah when his disciples do not, is content to be called a dog for her daughter's sake. For she knows that Jesus can make her well. *Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.* Can you picture the scene?

Jesus and the heartbroken, angry, disappointed heathen woman. How did their eyes meet then? *And her daughter was made whole from that very hour.* Jesus doesn't even go round to the house to say Hello to the girl before casting out the demon. She's well again. All over and done with.

What do we learn from this strange story? First that it is true. The disciples were the original tellers of this story, and it is a story against themselves. They are presented as thick and obdurate so many times in the gospels – and in today's gospel even as cruel. People don't like stories against themselves, so that is evidence for the truth of this one. Astonishingly, this is also a story against Jesus. And, even if the disciples would tell a story against themselves, they would hardly tell one which appears to be against the One they are trying to promote as Son of God – unless the story were true.

But how did the alien woman know that Jesus could heal her daughter? Jesus himself tells us. *O woman great is thy faith.* It was her faith. Now here's a thing: faith is not some certain knowledge, as some who call themselves Christians would have it. You cannot have God in your pocket. Faith is precisely what you *don't* know. It is venturing into the darkness, into uncertainty in a spirit that looks like insane trust. Then when, broken like that woman, we stretch out our hands in this way, we find we have put them into the hands of Jesus Christ.